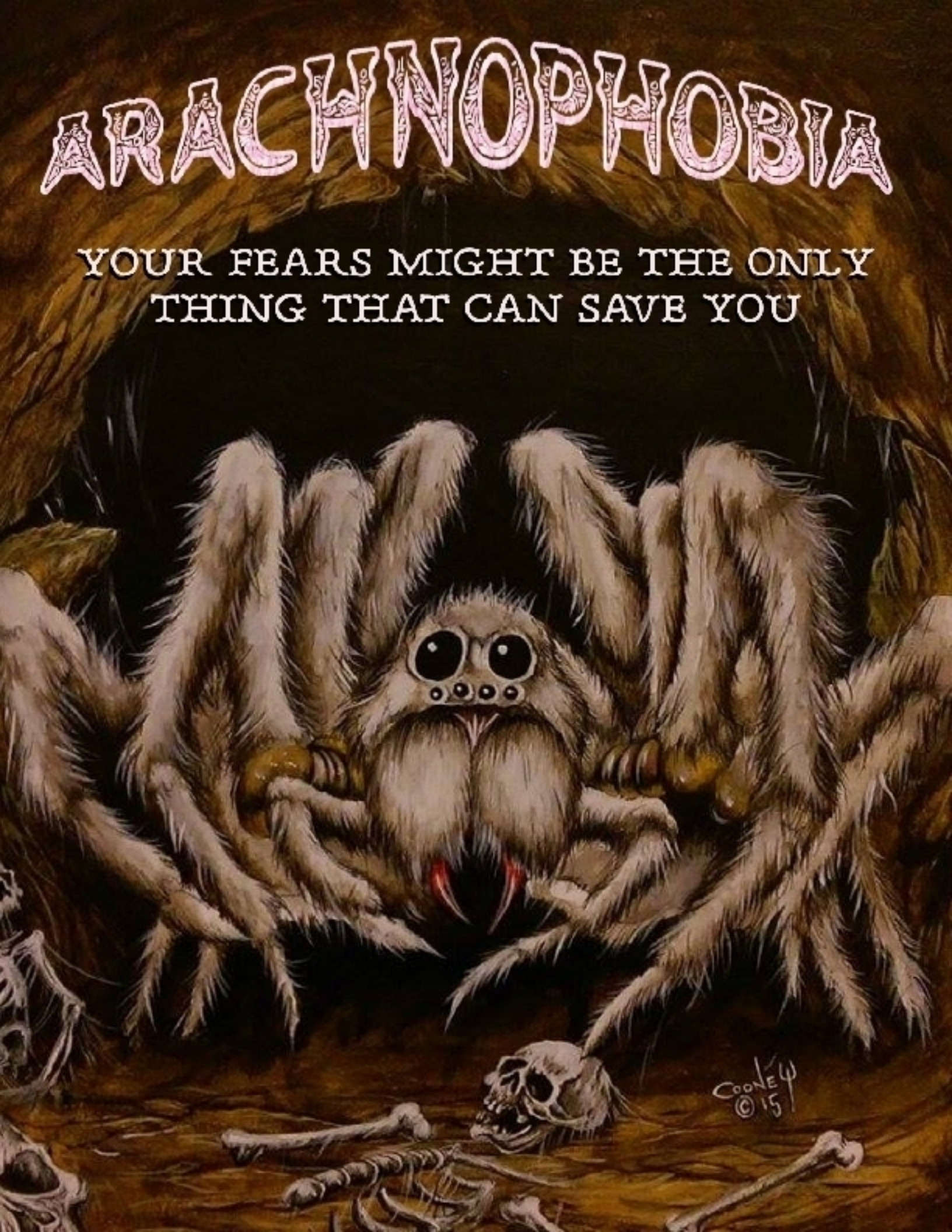
ARACHNOPHOBIA

YOUR FEARS MIGHT BE THE ONLY THING THAT CAN SAVE YOU



ARACHNOPHOBIA
An Anthology of Dark Stories

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Mind the webs as you walk into this collection of arachnid tales from Thirteen's talented dark minded authors…

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THE SPIDERS (OR HOW I'VE BEEN SINCE YOU LEFT)

Shenoa Carroll-Bradd

March 1st-

I found this old journal stuffed back under the bed by the wall, like it had slipped down the crack and been forgotten. I've never been the journaling type, that was always Jasmine's thing, but where's the harm? Besides, this one used to be hers. She scrawled her name inside the back cover, and if I press my face into the binding I swear I can still smell her. Makes me want to cry.

March 7th -

Stupid journal. I knew it wouldn't work. It's already been a week since the last entry. I just don't understand how some people can rattle away in these things every day. There's no dialogue, no plot and hardly any room for character development. My time is much better spent in front of the Underwood, where my words are worth something.

March 8th-

Dear Jasmine,

You said we should keep in touch, although I don't know if you actually meant it. That's often something people say when they want to walk out of your life guilt-free.

Shit, I'm sorry, that's not the direction I wanted this letter to go.

How are you? How's work?

About a month after you left, the royalty checks from Deadshot started coming in and lo and behold, they're big enough to let me quit my job! I gave my two weeks' notice a couple days ago, so soon I'll be a full-time writer. They're throwing me a goodbye party, but I don't think anyone's really going to miss me. I've been late so often because of my fucked up sleep schedule that I'm sure they'll be glad to see me go. I couldn't be happier, though. My commute's going to shrink down from twelve miles to twenty feet.

I'm still in our old apartment. I'm thinking of moving into something smaller, but I just don't know yet. I have so many memories stacked up in this place I can't just exchange it for something more convenient. Although I have noticed something weird lately.

I don't remember us having much of a pest problem, but in the last few weeks there's been tons of spiders. I don't know if it's all the rain that keeps driving them indoors, but it's been a pain.

Who knows, maybe they'll be a blessing in disguise. I could work them into the novel somewhere. It's almost done. Well, it's three quarters done.

Write back and maybe I'll let you know who dies in the last chapter.

Take care,
Jack

March 10th-

Spiders never used to bother me. They scare the shit out of my sister to this day, even though she's almost thirty now. Dad and I always had to deal with them when we were growing up. I understand their contribution to the eco-system and their vital role in the blahbitty-blah, but that doesn't mean I want them roaming around the place like tourists. At first I tossed them outside with the tried and true card-and-shot-glass routine, but either they find their way back inside or there's a lot more of the buggers than I thought. I guess I'll just have to start ignoring them and hope they pay me the same courtesy.

March 12th-

It's raining non-stop now and that's driving every eight-legged bastard into my space. I've still finished three chapters this week, but it seems like I'm fending off spindly wanderers every five minutes. I have to admit, though, the patter of rain on my window synchs up beautifully with the clack of the keys.

Nights this cold really hammer home how empty my bed is. Even at the end, when we fought over everything and had nothing civil to say to each other, I could still count on the comfort of her heat at my back.

March 15th-

The spiders are becoming a problem. I don't know where they find the time between keystrokes, but they've learned to spin webs in the teeth of my Underwood. I never see the tiny-bodied bastards, but within a few days their silk builds up enough to clog the ribbon and successfully sabotage me. It takes about an hour to take everything apart, clear off the webs, oil and reassemble the typewriter. Factor in the test runs to make sure everything's still in working order and I'm successfully derailed for the evening. It amazes me that they find hiding places during my intrusive cleanings. I don't know how they manage to secret themselves away so quickly and utterly.

March 17th-

They must be the industrious spiders you always see in film haunted houses and abandoned sanitariums; spiders who band together to weave entire tapestries and ethereal doors. Perhaps I've discovered a rare new species. Interior decorator spiders.

March 19th-

Having trouble sleeping. I keep hearing scratching in the walls. Thought I felt movement when I pressed my hand to the drywall.

March 22th-

The spiders are at it again. You'd think they'd stop after stealing my pillowcase. You'd think that'd be enough for them. But no. Today they took my boxers, the silk ones. The ones you gave me just before you left. I thought about it for hours, drawing diagrams and scribbling figures, trying to understand how critters so tiny could be so organized. I mean they aren't like ants. Ants thrive together and follow each other's pheromone trails. Spiders hunt, live and die alone. They don't form teams.

Oh.

I don't know why I wrote "you" there. Sorry. The ones Jasmine gave me.

March 27st-

Today I wrote without looking. I set a mirror behind the Underwood and watched myself type. I thought that perhaps they orchestrated their

stunts from behind but I saw no movement there. When I looked down they'd woven my fingers together.

I think they may be adapting.

April 2nd-

The other day I woke to find that they'd knitted me two stiff white socks without toes. They sat like paper-thin casts and made the strangest noise when I moved. It was a cross between silk whispering and paper tearing. I felt their 1,000,000 eyes on me as I removed the gift. I swear I heard a chittering sound too, as if their tongue-less mouths admonished me.

April 8th-

Dear Jasmine,

I don't know if you got my last letter, it should have arrived by now. Sometimes you just can't trust the mailman.

Anyway, the writing's been going well. Moderately well, at least. I took a day off from writing to look over the papers I'd built up over the week, to make sure everything was moving the way it should. I haven't accomplished as much as I thought I had, the delay I attribute to the meddling spiders. I'd rather not say how many sentences I scratched out. The longer I read, the brighter it dawned upon me: my heroine started speaking with your voice, saying those strange little things you used to throw into conversation. She's started to walk like you and she cries like you, too.

My villain, unfortunately, has gone though some changes of his own. He's started smoking my brand of cigarettes and wearing those jeans I tore on our trip to the river. He's started swerving to hit cats. He does things I don't remember typing.

I wonder how many spiders it takes to press a key. Sorry, I'll stop talking about spiders now. I know how much you hate them.

I'd love to hear about what you've been up to. I kinda feel like I'm the only man on stage here.

Jacky-boy

April 19th-

The spiders are at it again.

I spent way too much at the store this afternoon. Some of the items were necessities, others were just things I picked up and perused so I wouldn't have to go home. I didn't want them. I never bought them, just wandered around the store with them in my cart, made a full loop and put them back. The keys of my Underwood played tacky with Raid that night and glue traps waited every few feet along the baseboards. I laid even more in a fairy circle around my bed, just to be safe.

I worked until almost midnight, completely uninterrupted, despite the poison fumes. Nothing ever turned up in the traps. Nothing except one long leg, still twitching.

April 27th-

I can't tell if they're helping or hindering. Some days it seems like their sole purpose is to stall my efforts and other days they stay quiet. Today I found a discarded sheet that they'd made corrections on. Certain words were blanked out with tiny pillows of web and others were sketched across the margins in shiny, nearly invisible thread. I stashed it in a drawer so I could show someone later, but they took it back within a day. I don't know where they could have hidden it. It made me wonder how many spiders it takes to open a desk drawer. And then the image made my skin crawl. I wonder if they found their way in one by one, or if their arrival was a coordinated effort as well. I saw them crawling in rank and file, each leg skittering in time with the others. THAT image made me shudder. I had to work hard to clear my mind of it, but those questions kept squirming back. Eventually it took the conquering power of porn to keep me distracted.

April 29th-

Dear Jasmine,

I don't mean to keep bitching to you, because life is actually pretty sweet these days. No 9 to 5 to give me an ulcer, no noisy roommates (not that you were noisy). I can wake up at noon and walk around the apartment naked if I want. And I do.

My hair has been falling out since you left, though. Not that I blame you. I just mentioned it to cement the chronology. And I'm not going bald by any means. I've just noticed more hair collecting at the drain during showers, and extra strands on my pillow. Who knows though? I've had some crazy dreams lately; maybe I thrash in my sleep. That could pull some

hairs loose. I know I said I'd stop talking about the spiders, but I noticed that some of my hairs have made it into their webs. This could be through sheer coincidence, but it still creeps me out. I didn't study the webbing or anything, but I did notice that the hair wasn't simply strewn haphazardly throughout; it was lined up quite neatly with the other rows. I took a picture of it, but the flash made my strands blend in with everything else, and the light was too poor to go without. I think that's the most frustrating thing about this whole situation. I can't collect any proof. I'm like one of those backwoods farmers who swears he's been abducted by aliens. Only the spiders haven't done anything to my butt, as far as I know. Ha ha…

Anyway. You had a cameo in my dream the other night. You didn't say anything, just sat down across from me and smiled. It was nice to see you again.

Jack out

May 1st-

I think I hate it most when they crawl into my shower. Maybe that's where they get my hair?

May 3rd-

My editor called today. There was so much frustration in her voice that for a second, I thought it was Jasmine. She reminded me of the deadline, and demanded a word count.

I lied, but it was still too low for her liking. She told me to quit moping and put my back into it. I promised I would. She made me promise twice, then hung up. I know I'm not going to make the deadline, that much is clear. I'm going to lose the contract and then the apartment. I'll end my days on the street, selling my last possessions on a blanket and waving a copy of my first novel at passersby. "See?" I'll yell. "See? I was somebody for an instant."

I let myself marinade in self-pity for a few minutes, then poured a drink and settled down at the Underwood again. I thought again about buying a computer. It would save so much time in the editing stages, plus make organization a breeze and I'd always have a backup copy. I decided that would be my next step, once I finished the manuscript and got this whole pain of a project out of the way. I'll buy myself a pretty little

computer and let the Underwood become a part of the décor. If I keep it for another forty years, it'll be an antique, and I can sell it for a small fortune. A very small fortune.

May 8th –

I got a letter today. At first I thought it was from Jasmine, because her name was scrawled across the envelope. But I quickly recognized my own handwriting. It was the first letter I'd sent after she moved away. Unopened and stamped quite cruelly. I guess that means she hasn't received any of them and each one is making its way back to me right now.

I can't think of anything more depressing than having to watch my letters pile up by the door. It seems like proof that the world outside is gone and all that's left is me, this apartment and the spiders.

May 13th-

I couldn't stand it today. I read back over this journal and counted how many times I'd written the word 'spiders'. I think I need help. I really think I need help, but I won't be able to see anyone until the novel's finished. I don't have that kind of time anymore. And I don't have the money for it. But once I'm done, everything will be better. In the meantime, I'll have to be my own therapist.

I can't obsess about the spiders if they're no longer with me, right? I spent four and a half hours cleaning house. Every scrap of fabric got washed, every web destroyed, every scuttling demon sucked up by the vacuum. I moved every piece of furniture, put the nozzle up against every crack and hole in the baseboards, emptied the cupboards and even managed to get behind the refrigerator with my portable tornado. The very last thing I did was take apart the Underwood. I vacuumed each part individually, reassembled it and vacuumed it again. Now that they're gone, I can finally write in peace.

May 17th–

Nothing. Not one word. It's been three empty days and I've been unable to squeeze a single word out of my head. I can write in this diary and I can sketch out shopping lists, but my characters don't speak any more. They don't move around or interact; they don't even sit in place, staring out the window. Their weight still sits behind my temples, but it's a dead

sensation, like holding hands with a mannequin. I tried to give them a break, to work on one of my other projects, but those avenues were even darker. I could no longer remember where those plots were meant to go, and the characters sounded like strangers. Couldn't remember what traits went with what name. Who was meant to die? And which of these fools was the hero?

I've tried to brainstorm new stories, but my pen just sleeps between my fingers now, incapable of making a mark. I can't even doodle in the margins. If this continues, I'm going to have to see a doctor. Head doctor, hand doctor, it doesn't really matter to me. I just need someone with a degree to tell me this is only temporary.

Someone with more than an English degree.

Or maybe that's the answer. I need to visit an English professor. I'm sure Melville had periods of writer's block and Hemingway too. No writer's well can stay vibrant forever.

May 25th –

I actually had the gun in my hand, trying to convince myself that death was my last ticket. So many of my characters had faced down the void and lost…who was I to linger? And if I can't write anymore, what am I? Not a father, not a brother, barely a son and, worst of all, no one's friend. Without my backdrops and word-processed puppets, I'm just a man by himself, tormented by spiders. And now that the spiders are gone, what's left?

Most of the morning was spent trying to draft a suicide note. I thought briefly of blaming everything on Jasmine, just to ensure she'd have to think about me one last time, that she'd never forget me. I should blame her and why not? I'd been just fine before she left. My writing was tight and strong, I was healthy; there were no spiders. Everything was perfect until the day she decided she just didn't "love me" anymore. Amazing how quickly she disappeared from my life, as if she'd already packed everything away and had just been waiting for the right moment to run. I can't even hate her.

Yet when I put pen to paper, nothing came. I couldn't muster so much as a "Goodbye, cruel world" and that's the most hackneyed last line. How cruel that I worked so hard to extinguish clichés from my pages and here, at the last, would rejoice to pen one. Even if I could, what if the spiders came back? What would stop them from rewriting my suicide note once I'm

gone? Changing my words all around, making me sound even more pathetic.

The metal leaned cold against my skin. I took a breath… and something tickled my leg. I looked down at my threadbare robe. I wonder what Hemingway donned for his final adventure. Probably something better than this. My leg itched again. I pulled the robe back and startled a large, strangely colored spider. It crouched down on my knee, gathering up its long amber-jointed legs and giving me an ancient glare.

You killed my family. It seemed to say. *Fourteen generations spun in this room and you destroyed them all.*

"Go away." I whispered. "It's all over."

This spider was at least twice the size of the others, a deep, shining black. As I stared at it I began to notice just how heavy it was, as if the thing was slowly gaining mass. I wondered how I could have mistaken that for the brush of a loose thread. How did I not feel it climbing my shin? I waved the gun at it, but the spider refused to budge.

"Don't think I won't shoot you. I'm not all that attached to my knees right now."

Still, it remained.

"You might as well go. All your friends are gone-"

The spider sprang up, standing on the tips of its awful, segmented legs.

I flinched, bringing the barrel back up towards my temple. I smiled despite everything. "I can't believe I'm saying this." I looked down. "Hard to believe I'm talking to a spider too. But I actually miss you little fuckers."

It settled back down.

I swear I could feel the pressure of each banded leg and a strange, hot weight where its shiny abdomen touched my skin. The spider and I stared at each other for the longest minutes of my life.

At last it took a few careful steps back and sank its fangs into my skin. I yelled and swung for it, but the spider dodged me. It rose up on four legs and hissed like a hurt cat. Fast as fear it scuttled forward and dipped its abdomen into the wound. A sick heat radiated through my muscles as I watched it, mesmerized and impotent. Deep down I knew that if I tried to stop it now my arms wouldn't move. It would be like trying to sprint in a dream.

The spider's abdomen bobbed a few times, then it turned and leapt from my knee to the desktop and hurried back to some secret place.

My leg burned where it'd bit me and the wound was red and raised like some pubescent horror. The screaming core of my brain knew what had just happened, but a slow fog encompassed me, softly smothering the worry, the terror, and the pain.

After a few moments I looked down, surprised to see a gun in my hand.

I put it away in my desk drawer and went to the bathroom to splash some water on my face. Three minutes and one Band-Aid later, I sat down at the Underwood and began to type. The feeling of being watched crawled along the back of my neck, and for once, it was comforting. My life reflected in eight eyes for now, hundreds in a month, when my new family hatches.

I wonder if they will call me mother.

SPIDER HAIKU

Brian Barnett

White Tendrils

something in my hair
wispy webs and white tendrils
the eggs have hatched

Dangling in a Web

empty hummingbird
husk dangling in a web
sweeter than candy

Nightmares of Spiders

nightmares of spiders
awake but paralyzed
swelling spider host

Bitten

bitten and fetid
necrotic sloughing tissue
skeletal remains

That Tickle You Feel

that tickle you feel
eight dancing legs scouting food
coursing down your spine

Black Dots

inner ear cotton
warm crackling explosion
scattering black dots

Something Above You

something above you
slowly coming to focus
reaching for your face

AS NATURE INTENDED

Ken Goldman

Geoffrey's ultimate decision felt right. He had to smile while anticipating his first face-to-face with the woman soon to be his new wife.

Not that the divorce settlement had been a day at the beach. Ending his marriage had cost him a bundle and the price tag included his home and child. His agreement to play Heather's weekend father poured scalding salt water into the wound, he hated having to drag his kid into this.

There was no avoiding it. The legal sharks from Lansky & Meyers had taken their seats alongside Celia and across the table from him. That morning he felt lucky to have escaped with both gonads remaining inside his boxers and not tucked into Robert Lansky's briefcase. In the end Geoffrey had kept his late model BMW, his dog Barney, less than 30 per cent of the couple's joint savings and a smattering of his dignity. Celia got everything else.

He contested nothing. How could he? A lawyer hearing the real story would have assumed the accountant had spent so much time computing actuary tables his brain had soft boiled like a three minute egg. Geoffrey chose to tell the truth of his affair as best as he could manage it. Yes, there had been another woman, someone he had met on the Internet, of all places. No, they had not even met formally. He saw no reason to admit to more.

...because saying more could get him immediately escorted to a rubber room.

Geoffrey had never viewed himself as a candidate for a mixed marriage. It seemed hard enough to vault the hurdle of simply belonging to opposite sexes. Any couple remaining together as long as he and Celia soon realized men and women were aliens to one another. Often it became impossible to work out any realistic compromise that did not necessitate the exchange of gunfire. Maybe Geoffrey should have seen the warning signals during their engagement when his Golden Labrador Retriever had chowed down on Celia's parakeet.

The arguing subsided, replaced by smoldering resentment and eventually silence. The couple had learned to endure entire meals seated at

the same table without exchanging a single word. Shortly before the divorce Celia had marched into the bathroom while Geoffrey was shaving. She shoved a pink paperback book into his face, Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus. Geoffrey could not have said it better. Like combining earth and water, the only possible result of opposite sexes cohabitating was to produce mud.

For obvious reasons Shelina was the exception to that rule. Regardless of the legal pummeling, Geoffrey's decision to leave Celia became a no-brainer. He felt no bothersome guilt-soaked regrets about trashing the life he had built with his wife of ten years. Once he saw Shelina's smile illuminate his computer screen, he knew what he had to do. He and this incredible woman belonged together. One might as well have asked him whether he would care to live without oxygen. Ms. Opportunity had knocked and had even left him e-mail. Only a fool would leave her waiting inside a chat room. The possibility of re-evaluating his decision seemed too absurd to entertain for even a moment.

The downloaded live-shots of Shelina cinched it. In that single blinding instant of revelation the man's entire value system shifted. Geoffrey recognized the irony in Celia's suggested reading. The punch line was not that Geoffrey was from Mars and Shelina was not from Venus. Shelina was from a distant little star called Diaphaenesia-10 in the Beta-4 Taurus system a good way past Venus...

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The computer screen suddenly flared to life with a blinding flash never intended by the gang at Microsoft. Geoffrey still had trouble believing the simplicity of it all whenever Shelina made contact.

"Geoffrey? Are you there?"

She spoke to him from somewhere among the stars, her beauty so astounding it would have been impossible for any man not to be riveted.

"Been waiting for you right here for the past two hours. How much longer?"

"Not long. I just wanted to see you before I set the coordinates. I love you, Geoffrey."

He leaned close to the monitor and touched the glass of the screen. Shelina's computer image had been all he had ever seen of this woman,
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except for once. It happened during their third conversation almost a year ago. Half joking he had asked her if she would mind displaying her physical attributes to him. His reasoning was deadly serious, but he could not comfortably explain his need to know. She belonged to another world. Truth was; he feared that beneath the woman's silken garments she might have the skin of a lizard. For all he knew she could have even had a penis. He had no other way to make certain. He flat-out asked her to show him the goods.

She did just that. Apparently the women of Di-10 had no concept for the word 'inhibition'. There on the computer's monitor Shelina stood before him nude and unafraid, her skin flawless porcelain. She seemed completely composed with her nakedness, as if Geoffrey had simply asked to tell him the time.

"Are you pleased?"

Her voice belonged more to a curious child than to the siren standing before him.

"More than I can say. You're exquisite, Shelina."

Months later such words still seemed inadequate. The bridegroom-to-be doubted he could ever tire of looking at her.

"I'm preparing to set the coordinates for Earth, Geoffrey, but there is something, something I should --" Shelina hesitated, as if afraid to add anything that might jeopardize their union. "There is something I believe you should know..." Her voice sounded almost plaintive, but it made her all the more endearing. "If it will change anything - if it will change your feelings for me - it is best that I know now. Before I... before we --"

Nothing could change his feelings for her. Geoffrey felt mild amusement that Shelina could even entertain the thought.

"Tell me," he said, more charmed than curious. "Do Diaphaenesian women shed their skins like snakes? Morph into slime creatures in old age? Eat their young?"

He heard the woman gasp. She waited a moment before she spoke.

"Of course not."

"Well, then, how bad could it-?"

"It's more complicated. It concerns our - what is your word for it? - our evolution . I'm a religious woman, Geoffrey. Diaphaenesians are not as you. Our ancestry is not tree apes, as are yours, according to some beliefs. We have evolved from something else. From what you call... God."

Geoffrey had to restrain himself from laughing out loud. Here, in Shelina's own words, came the intergalactic equivalent of Earth's oldest theological conundrum, the origins of a species newly applied to extra terrestrials. Presented by any religious zealot from Earth this argument was unwinnable. Geoffrey had no intentions of debating creationism with the woman he intended to marry. If once upon a time Diaphaenesians were created in God's own image, well then, God must have had himself one hell of a day.

"I would have expected nothing less than godliness in your lineage," he told her.

Shelina's smile filled the computer screen.

"Then I am yours, my darling," she said. "Wait for me?"

"To the end of the world. But preferably sooner."

She blew him a kiss. The monitor flickered off.

Geoffrey eagerly awaited the arrival of the woman who would be his wife.

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"So, you told your bridegroom?" the older she-creature asked her daughter.

"I did, Mother. He seemed quite understanding."

The elder female raised a tentacle that explored the air then disappeared again inside her skull. She seemed unconvinced.

"So strange. I would have thought one from Earth might have an inherent disgust of insects. Or at least some fear of them. The two species seem so adversarial on your Geoffrey's planet. What do they call them there-- bugs?"

The two females fell silent. The word had an ominous sound.

"We never speak of such things, the earthman and I, Mother. Geoffrey's love sees past what you call my insect origins. He sees only that which God has created. You know how I feel about your ridiculing my religious beliefs, Mother--"

The older female had learned to tolerate Shelina's devout convictions which often bordered on the fanatical. The girl simply refused to accept scientific fact.

"Will your earth lover's eyes see beyond your mantis origins when, after having made love with him, you dine on his flesh?"
~~~

Shelina had no ready response. This ancient ritual had been extant for as long as she remembered. It had caused the male populace of Diaphaenesia to vanish almost completely. The young bride had a difficult time reconciling the logic of the ritual with the propagation of her species. But who was she to argue with the divine purpose of nature as the Almighty intended?

"I'll be setting the coordinates for Earth now, Mother." She leaned forward to kiss the woman, then smiled reassuringly. "I imagine I should be home shortly after dinner..."

CLUB ARACHNOID

Martin McClymont

Richard gazed out of the window at the fleeting landscape passing in a blur until the light bid a gradual farewell and a diluted dankness supplanted the day. Shadows lengthened and the summer rain began to fall again with gusto, battering the vibrating window pane of the 9.20 service to Glasgow, until Richard was no longer able to see much of the world beyond, only a reflection of himself and the lit interior of the coach behind him on the raindrop stippled pane.

The train had been jam-packed full of revellers and party goers, ready for a typical Saturday night filled with the usual bout of drunken debauchery when he had gotten on at Ardrossan. One girl, who Richard guessed was young enough to be his daughter, pulled down her top, almost exposing her breasts to him with a mischievously lascivious grin. He averted his eyes, returning his attentions to the vague, shadowy landscape with his face crimson, burning with embarrassment. Eventually, the crowd thinned until only a dribble of passengers remained. A young man sat across from him, listening to blaring rock music on his iPod while fiddling with a mobile phone. A small, elderly woman, in the seat next to Richard, ate a bag of salted peanuts with rapid, jerky movements, like a gerbil stuffing its pouches with sunflower seeds. Every so often she would stop and stare up at him, flashing a perfect set of plastic dentures and Richard would reciprocate with a wan smile and turn away.

When the train arrived at its destination, Richard alighted and, as instructed, made a beeline for the bar with the obsidian fascia and the words, ‘Tar Bar’ emblazoned above the entrance, located adjacent the station. Ed had arranged to meet him there at eleven. The rain had intensified and he was glad of the shelter and welcoming heat the little bar provided. The interior, in keeping with the theme, was mostly painted in dim hues of glossy black and dark brown. Startlingly bright, white spotlights illuminated the bar, partially obscured by a uniform row of burly, leather clad, bearded bikers propped and seated around the oak semi-circle. Richard pushed his way between a pair of rotund men, accessing the bar

and browsing the selection of multicoloured liquids in a myriad of bottles, twinkling in the glare of the spotlights above. On the wall, near the gent's toilet, an old, dusty blackboard announced Sunday evening's entertainment. *LIVE – Gordon Gomez and The Sonic Death Rays.* Richard grinned; it didn't seem so long ago when he and Ed had scoured the local pubs and clubs of Ayrshire and Glasgow in search of unsigned acts with equally ridiculous names.

At the far end a female bar hand stood with her back to Richard, bantering with a couple of amused, yet dangerous looking men with shaved heads and thick, tattooed arms. The barmaid was clad in dark, gleaming PVC, her silky black hair cascaded over her shoulders, almost reaching her slender waist. One of the bikers motioned in Richard's direction and raised a glass. Richard nodded, smiled and silently cursed himself for staring. The last thing he needed tonight was a broken face, he had to be careful.

The barmaid turned, fixing her deep blue, mascara-bordered eyes in his direction and smiled. She strode towards him, the high heels of her knee-length boots clacking on the smooth, hard surface of the floor, audible even above the din of blaring rock music. She wore a tight, corset top which pressed her breasts together alluringly and her deep red, glossy lips shone as she passed under the lights, an arresting contrast to the pale skin of her face. Richard was enraptured by the sight of this Gothic beauty. Her eyes were wide and innocent, yet behind the façade they were seductive and filled with promises of sexual ecstasies Richard could only conceive of in a cognitive whim explored in the starlight hours within the confines of his sleeping mind.

He folded his arms and propped himself up by his elbows on the molasses coloured bar, leaning forward to engage this fallen angel and at the last moment, lost his cool and remained silent.

She matched his stare with an unbounded intensity and then brought her head level with his, mere inches away.

"What can I get you?" she sighed, her warm breath gently caressing his face, raising tiny hairs on the nape of his neck and sending an electric charge down his spine.

"Pint, please," Richard replied, a coy smile spreading across his face.

The woman snatched a glass from beneath the bar and, holding it under the spout of a nearby pump, pulled the handle forward gradually.

"On your own tonight?" she asked, raising one eyebrow quizzically.

Richard fixed her with a meaningful look, which seemed to last a little too long before answering. He wondered vaguely if she was coming on to him or if her coquettish nature was merely an act, a prerequisite of the barmaid's job role. If she was genuinely flirting, he was more than willing to reciprocate.

"I'm meeting an old friend actually," he answered, evading the fathomless depths of her eyes, should he be pulled in.

It had been some time since he had seen, or spent any time with his best buddy, and childhood chum. Ed had been a constant companion through the heady highs and the deep lows of his life, seeing him through the tough estrangement and subsequent divorce from his wife, Katrina, and much more before, and after.

Two years previously, Ed had moved to the big city, to be with a woman he had met via an internet dating site. Six months on, Richard attended Ed and Nora's wedding as the groom's best man, a few months later, Nora gave birth to their first child. Ed had it made; he was given a fresh start in a new area with a partner who loved and supported him and a family in tow. He knew he was being selfish, but Richard felt a brief pang of jealousy. Where he had failed in his life, Ed had succeeded. He, Richard, would never be a home-maker; something he would readily admit was one of the main reasons for the divorce. He would never seek to stray, or stoop so low as to cheat on his previous partners. However, he always experienced an air of restlessness after a certain length of time in a relationship.

The barmaid placed the glass of amber lager before him. "Tara," she said extending a slender hand.

Richard took it. "Pleased to meet you Tara, I'm Richard."

"Richard? You're Ed's mate, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. You know Ed?" Richard asked his eyebrows arched in surprise.

Her eyes darkened and the lustre, which had only moments ago, made her so aesthetically alluring, fled. Richard could see her expression flit from engaged to vacant within a split second as she became cold and business-like.

She pulled a small folded scrap of paper out from under the bar, lifted his pint and shoved it underneath. "He asked me to give you this."

Richard frowned as Tara turned and wandered away from him to the other side of the bar.

"Wait! How much do I owe you?" he called after her.

"The drink's on the house," she yelled over her shoulder, waving a hand dismissively.

Richard unfolded the paper, shaking his head. A small rectangular piece of card with the words, '*Arachnoid, Admit One'*, stencilled across the front tumbled from the folds, landing face up on the bar. Richard scooped it up and stuffed it into his shirt pocket, then turned his attentions to the hastily scrawled note.

166 ½ Sandwell Street, Between the Crouch and Sleezees.
Be there buddy, I'm counting on you.
Eddie.

Great! Ed was giving him the run around and what the hell was 'Arachnoid', a nightclub of some sort?

For a moment, Richard considered hopping on the next train back home. He had travelled to Glasgow hoping for a quiet drink and a catch up with an old friend, not to get drunk, go clubbing and make a fool of himself. The urge for that sort of behaviour had dissipated some years ago, back in his twenties when it was still considered acceptable to a degree. However, there was urgency in the brief note. 'I'm counting on you', the note said, counting on him for what?

He felt torn. In one hand he could leave, send his apologies and a brief explanation, cut his losses and enjoy the safety and comfort of his own home. On the other hand there was a possibility that Ed needed his help with something. Maybe he was in some sort of a fix, in which case it would be Richard's place to help his friend out, as Ed had helped him in the past.

Deciding on an active course of action, Richard weaved his way through the thickening crowd towards the exit. Upon reaching the door, he granted himself one final furtive glance towards the bar, seeking Tara. She had gone, supplanted by two burly barmen clad in black 'Tar Bar' branded t-shirts.

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The address was not as difficult to find as Richard had first anticipated. Between ‘The Crouch’ and ‘Sleezees’, as the note had outlined, there was a narrow alleyway. Glasgow was full of them, but this one was only wide enough for Richard to crabwalk down, far too narrow for a vehicle of any sort.

Richard carefully walked sideways down the alleyway, the textured brick catching tiny fibres of his jacket, threatening to ruin the fabric. Further on, to his relief, the alley widened, allowing him to return to his usual gait, quickly closing the gap to the black, wrought iron door at the far end. It was bare, except for the numbers 166½ chalked onto the dark, rough brick to the right of the entrance. A fizzing electric light hummed above the door, casting long shadows amongst the empty cardboard boxes and trash cans overflowing with rotting garbage. Like most alleyways in Glasgow, it reeked of piss and stale alcohol, mixed with the awful stench of rotten food waste. Richard covered his mouth and nose in a feeble attempt to ward off the pervading, unpleasant smell.

He slapped the door several times with the flat of his palm, causing a thunderous booming echo. Seconds later, the door was quickly jerked inwards and a broad shouldered, bulky man stepped out to meet Richard, his massive belly pushing the front of his shirt out an almost impossible distance.

“I’m here to meet a friend, Eddie Long.”

The doorman gazed at Richard, with an angry, unintelligible scowl painted on his round, heavily bearded face. His thick, inked arms blocked the path into the building and Richard noted each tattoo, stretching the length of his forearm up to the folded, sleeve of his shirt, were either spider, or spider-web themed.

“You got a pass?” The bouncer grumbled after a long moment. Richard removed the card from his pocket and handed it over silently.

The large man snatched it from Richard’s grasp and studied it closely, as though Richard might have forged the ticket. He felt a pang of rising anger, which threatened to spill over.

“Is there a problem?” he asked, incredulous at the doorman’s stroppy attitude. He wanted to tell the guy to ram it where the sun doesn’t shine and head for home.

“No sir, no problem at all,” the hulk said, bowing his head briefly in a submissive gesture.

Richard frowned. He wondered what had changed the man's demeanour so profoundly within such a brief space of time.

He moved aside, allowing Richard entry to what he now expected to be the worst, and due to its obscure location, quietest club in the city. Moments later, he was proven wrong. The hulk led him into a massive room where the thudding echo of complex techno music rattled the girders of the iron mesh staircase they descended to the dance floor. A mixed gathering of people threw themselves around, pumping their legs and swinging their arms to the bass rhythmic blasts emitting from the surrounding amplifiers. Strobe lights flickered erratically, throwing Richard's vision into a blurred series of jarring, multicoloured increments.

"Eddie's in the VIP lounge, I'll take you to him!" the hulk yelled in Richard's ear above the blaring cacophony.

They pushed their way through the jumble of fitfully flailing limbs towards their destination at the rear of the hall, a large, double door archway, guarded by two heavy set stewards. The hulk nodded to each in turn and held the door open for Richard, then pulled the door closed behind him.

"Richard! For a moment there I didn't think you were going to show!" Ed yelled rising from his seat and embracing his friend briefly.

"Ed, good to see you. What's with all this cloak and dagger bullshit?" Richard retorted, unable to keep the irate inflection from his voice.

He noticed the room was quieter. The vibrations from the powerful club amps could still be felt as the floor trembled slightly with every pounding thud of bass, but most of the blaring, ear throbbing screech had been filtered out by soundproofing.

"Ah, sorry about that, but, you know me, I always like to keep it interesting," Ed replied, holding his hands out from his sides apologetically.

"Interesting?" Richard echoed. "You're lucky I didn't drag my arse back up the coast when you pulled that one on me." The words were out before he could stop himself. Feeling guilty, he deviated from the subject, softening his words, "How's the family, Ed? It's been a while."

Ed's grin returned. "Ah, they're good," he said distractedly. "It's been too long, my man! We got to do this more often. Like the office?" He swept a hand around the room.

"Nice, new job huh?"

“New job? I *own* this place, buddy. This is my new life and things are great; all the better for seeing your ugly mug again,” he jibed.

Grinning, Richard nodded. “That’s great! I’m happy for you Ed,” he said sincerely.

“I got something to show you.” Ed lifted a handset fixed to the wall and spoke into it, “Bring us a couple of beers, make sure they’re cold.”

Moments later the office doors were thrown open and Tara, the barmaid from the Tar Bar entered, expertly balancing two tall glasses of lager on a plastic tray. Richard gaped.

“I believe you two have already met,” Ed grinned.

“Hey,” Tara said flippantly, handing Richard a glass. She didn’t appear too pleased, either with Richard’s presence, or with Ed.

“Hi,” he returned, lost for words.

“Join us, Tara, go get yourself a drink. I was just about to introduce Richard here to some of our friends in the basement.”

Tara nodded, business-like and left the office, heading for the bar. When she was out of earshot, Ed elbowed Richard playfully. “She’s single, I believe,” he said wagging an eyebrow.

Richard blanched. “You pimping your staff out too, Eddie?” he said scornfully, inserting the conversation stopper tactfully and successfully. “Any more surprises I can prepare myself for? What’s downstairs, a door to Narnia?”

Ed laughed and motioned to the winding staircase in the corner, leading down to the basement. “Something better than that; just wait and see for yourself.”

When Tara returned, the trio descended into the sparsely lit basement. She avoided Richard’s gaze, giving concise answers whenever he spoke to her. He had no idea why she was being that way, but it bothered him. He consoled himself with the realisation that she had probably been like this previously and that the flirty barmaid persona he had encountered earlier was just an act to keep the punters smiling.

Ed led them through a heavy, steel door down into a narrow chamber. A moment later a glaring electric light strip hummed into life, revealing rows of glass fronted tanks. At the far end of the room, a large, tinted glass panel reflected them. A myriad of various scientific instruments littered worktops surrounding the room beneath the smaller tanks, microscopes of various shapes and sizes, test tubes, beakers and petrie dishes.

“Welcome to the lab, Richie. What do you think?” Ed said, sweeping his hands around the room.

Richard gazed around at the glass fronted tanks, filled with twigs and frosted with a haze of cobwebs. Upon closer inspections, he realised, with a shudder of revulsion that the occupants of the compact cells, scampering doggedly over the transparent panes, were busy clusters of tiny spiders.

“Bugs?”

“Not bugs, Richie... spiders. And not just any spiders, what we have here is the future.” Ed’s grin stretched farther up his face than Richard thought possible, the corners of his mouth almost reaching the heavy pewter hoops hanging from his earlobes and exposing a uniform row of yellow, tobacco stained teeth. But the humour did not reach his eyes, they remained neutral, an unflinching and enigmatic stare determined to give nothing away.

However, in that stare Richard read more than Ed had intended to reveal and prepared himself for a revelation. He didn’t know what to expect yet, but he knew it would be big, and soon. He had known Ed most of his life, well enough to realise that his friend never made half-assed attempts to do anything, he always ran the full distance.

“The Brown Recluse, an arthropod said to be a myth, born out of media driven hyperbole and erroneous, anxiety filled public hearsay, further confounded by medical misdiagnoses. Does this look like a myth to you, Richie?” Ed asked, tapping the glass on a nearby tank sharply with a fingernail.

Richard shook his head silently then turned his head towards Tara, who stood propping her hip against the lab worktop, wearing the same manic grin as her boss and gazing intently at Ed.

“The Brown Recluse burrows into flesh where it lays its eggs. Over time, the egg sac grows, causing immense swelling in the infected area. This is usually followed by a medical procedure to remove the Brown Recluse’s offspring... usually. But what happens when the sac is not removed? Well, the little ‘uns wage war on one another, under the skin of their host, battling for superiority, until one remains, then they grow, rather rapidly and meld with the host, becoming one with the human, creating a hybrid.”

“Ed, what are you playing at? You run a club, great! But what’s all this shit?” Richard shot at his friend impatiently.

“Progress Richie, that’s what this is. Every one of those people up there, in the club, on the dance-floor, will be part of this,” Ed lowered his voice dramatically, almost inaudibly. “They want to be one with the Arachnoids.”

The two stewards who were stood at the office doors when Richard entered descended the winding staircase, a tattoo of heavy metallic raps announcing their arrival. At ground level, they stopped, side by side, blocking the only exit.

“Richard!” Ed snapped, commanding his friend’s attention. “You asked how Nora was, why don’t you ask her yourself?”

He flicked a large, lever-like switch on the wall and immediately the tinted glass wall became transparent. For a long moment, Richard tried to make sense of what he was seeing in the room beyond.

The creature had the torso and head of a human female. The neck bent at a ninety degree, upright angle from the shoulders, gazing from deep within hollow renal sockets, where a distant glimmer of recognition caused the creature to pause. Insect-like legs sprouted from the stumps where human arms and legs had been; ragged mottled, purple flesh hung in strands from the wounds and a further two legs protruded from each of the creature’s sides.

Nora Long had been a heavy built, yet attractive woman, long haired and blue eyed, almost Amazonian in appearance. This thing was a corruption of those qualities, horrid and deformed, staring into the lab beyond its lair longingly. The creature’s mouth opened impossibly wide, making way for a pair of jet black pincers, dripping with blood and saliva.

Richard recoiled in fear and disgust, “What the fu— what have you done?” he almost screeched at Ed, bleary eyed and furious. “You... are *sick*!”

“They wanted to become like this, it was their choice. This is a club that can only be joined by invitation, not just anyone can join and that’s why I invited you here, Richard! Just imagine the possibilities.”

“What, the possibility of being host to a fucking insect?” Richard roared. “You’ve gone insane, Ed!”

“These insects, as you so witlessly put it, are the future dominant species on earth! They existed in a form, long before mankind and they shall live and thrive when mankind, as we know it, is extinct. The only way of survival, is to assimilate, to become one with the Arachnoid.”

The creature who had been Nora Long fell against the reinforced glass with enough force to raise a tremulous, hollow boom from inside the tank. Its solid legs flailed in the air as it rolled onto its back and flipped upright once again, its dead eyes scanning the lab beyond and falling upon Ed with unmistakable recognition.

"We are scum," Ed added robotically "human, lowlife scum! The Arachnoid hybrids are a superior race, the superior race. The human race is insignificant in comparison, bound by human craving and compulsion; hunger for more food than our bodies need, pro-creation through the satisfaction of sexual desire, the Arachnoid is fettered by none of these. Now you know why we invited you here."

"You're nuts!" Richard wailed, glancing at Tara, who avoided his eyes, gazing at the ground instead.

"I regret the course of action we must take, Richard. I thought you of all people would understand. No matter, you will share our vision in time." Ed pulled a narrow object from his pocket and plunged the tip of the syringe into Richard's neck, depressing the plunger quickly.

Richard flailed, swinging his fist up instinctively and making contact with something meaty with an audible thwack. A second later, he was being wrestled to the ground by Ed's goons. He fought with every fleeting ounce of strength in his body, right to the end, until the darkness took him.

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Richard woke to a clanging, panel beating echo. He forced his eyes open, squinting against the glaring blaze of overhead spotlights and swallowing back the caustic ascent of bitter bile. The anaesthetic Ed had administered was wearing off.

"Ah, you're awake.... great!" a tinny voice echoed over a crackling tannoy system. Ed stood side by side with Tara, grinning at Richard through the misty, reinforced glass.

Richard frowned, still gauging his surroundings. He was in the large tank with the tinted window; he had gathered that much, but what he needed now was an exit, some way of escape so he could wipe the stupid fucking smile off Ed's face. The heavy 'chink' of two solid objects colliding commanded his attentions to the far side of the tank. There stood one of Ed's creations, part of which remained recognisable as Ed's wife, Nora.
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Richard let out a whimper of fear and disgust, scuttling backwards into the corner. The Nora-thing tilted its head to one side, causing its lank, dirty blond hair to fall forward, partially obscuring its horrendous face.

"Don't mind her, she won't harm you, not when you are on the verge of crystallises. Anyway, I think she recognises you."

Richard raised his forearm. There, an inch shy of his wrist, a convex bulge threatened to burst from his flesh.

"Ed, let me out of here! NOW!" he screamed, slamming the window with his fists.

Ed smirked "all in good time..."

"No, you prick, NOW!" Richard interjected. "I swear to god, when I get out of here I'm going to knock that smug grin from your face, you twisted asshole," Ed's smile faltered for a brief moment supplanted by a flash of anger then returned, wider than ever.

"God? There is no god, only evolution, survival of the fittest. You, are one of the fittest... almost, you should be thankful for what I've done for you."

The clear glass darkened again, blocking out the scene of the lab beyond, locking Richard in with the creature. He stared for a while, his panicked brain playing out his fate over and over in his mind's eye. The Nora-thing's hooked pincers twitched reflexively, then retracted back into the torn mouth of its ruined, human face. Richard screwed his eyes shut tight in disgust as strings of black drool escaped the orifice hitting the ground with a wet smack.

The tall creature let out a deep moan of anguish and crept forward, its pointed legs impacting on the metallic floor hard. Richard buried himself deeper into the corner. Soon, he would be similar to this abomination, when the bulge in his arm burst *inside* his body, releasing thousands of tiny creatures to battle to the death within him; he shuddered.

"Raaaaaaaaiiiiissshhhhheeeeeee."

Richard's head jerked up and he faced the creature from across the room. He was sure he had heard it. Ed had said 'she remembers you', maybe this creature still held a human consciousness. Maybe, it was still Nora, at least on the inside.

"Nora?" Richard whispered gently.

The creature nodded, its filthy hair swaying forward, then back over its face.

“Nora, do you remember me?” Richard asked, stepping away from the wall.

“Raaiiiiiiiiiiiissssshhhhhhhhheeeeeeeeeee,” Nora repeated, nodding its head again in confirmation.

The creature stepped forward again awkwardly, almost losing its balance this time. It skittered over the floor, legs skidding, tearing long, curled shavings from the metal grid with the sharp tips of its pointed legs. It tipped and hit the wall nearest Richard with a resounding boom, leaving a large concavity upon impact, before finding its balance again. The walls of their cell, although thick, were only composed of a foam-like insulating substance, coated with a thin layer of a softer metal, as though the room had once been used as a cold-storage unit.

Richard stared at the coils of steel which the creature had torn from the floor for a long moment before addressing the Arachnoid. “Nora, if you’re still in there, we need to get out of this room. We need to stop Ed from doing this to anyone else, do you understand?”

Eventually, the creature nodded slowly. It scanned the walls, then the floor as Richard had, raised its massive, spindly front legs and threw itself at the door. A squealing, wrenching whine echoed assaulting Richard’s eardrums as Nora pulled her hooked mandibles through the door. In seconds, a heaped mound of metal shavings and foam littered the ground.

Richard clambered over the heap into a narrow corridor, closely trailed by Nora, who struggled to squeeze through the hole. Deep, rumbling vibrations from the club above stroked the tiny hairs on Richard’s arms, bringing his attention back to the bulging egg sac; the catalyst which would transform him from man to arthropod hybrid. He prodded it gently with his forefinger. The skin felt tight, almost at bursting point. He imagined the pain which would follow the egg sac rupturing and the tiny prisoners making their escape into his body, growing, and fighting for ownership under his skin, inside.

He raced down the corridor, back into the darkened lab, leaving Nora behind for a moment while he searched desperately for something sharp, a knife, a piece of glass, anything to operate, to remove the thing from his arm. He would rather lose his arm than his entire self to the Arachnoid.

He pulled drawers from the worktop, the contents hitting the floor with a deafening clatter. Amongst the strewn debris lay a scalpel. Richard snatched it up, slammed his arm onto the worktop and, gritting his teeth

against the impending pain, pushed the razor sharp point into the soft flesh of his arm.

When the pain came, it was an excruciating wave of agony which set every nerve on fire. The pain intensified with each careful twist of the blade. Richard cut expertly, avoiding contact with the fragile membrane of the egg sac which pushed against his flesh. Blood pumped from the self-inflicted wound, spilling onto the tiles with a sickly patter. Minutes later, he held a large chunk of flesh in his hand. Turning the nearest Bunsen burner on to a blue flame, he tipped it onto its side and placed the egg sac directly into the furious roar of the fire.

The flesh surrounding the web netting sizzled noisily upon contact before erupting into flames. A faint squealing sound began as several small ashes rolled from the sac. Richard peered with mounting disgust as a dozen tiny insects crawled drunkenly from the fizzling mass; small, flaming exo-skeletal forms being quickly consumed and reduced to cinders.

Richard backed away, gripping his arm tight in a weak attempt to staunch the rapid flow of blood from the brutal wound in his arm. His fingers tingled, indicating some tendon damage. He ignored the pain, sweeping around the room, turning the gas tap on each burner to 'on'.

He froze as a high pitched screech caused his eardrums to quiver painfully and sent an icy finger coursing down his spine. He heard the clatter of oversized arachnid limbs upon the steel floor and turned a moment too late to avoid Nora's clumsy frame as she cannon-balled into him, knocking down and sending him skidding across the floor.

She was not alone. Richard scrambled to his feet, staring fixedly at the ensuing commotion as Nora battled erratically against one of her own kind, staggering to and fro amongst the flickering flames which spread rapidly throughout the burning laboratory. The other arachnid was stockier and taller than Nora, towering above the flames. The once youthful face of a teenage boy glared with wicked malevolence as its arachnid pincers opened and snapped shut with a loud, sharp clack, powerful enough to sever a man at the waist.

"*WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?*"

Ed looked on, eyes wide and nostrils flaring with rage. His attention flitted between the fighting creatures' tangled legs and the orange flames which now crackled and roared as it crept up the walls, licking the ceiling with corrosive intensity.

“Ed, hit the fire alarm, get the club evacuated before anyone else gets hurt,” Richard blurted, stepping forward to grab him by the shoulder with the intent of shaking some sense into him.

But Ed drew back, aiming a swift and accurate right hook, which collided audibly with Richard’s jaw. Richard’s head snapped back and he fell heavily on the floor inches away from a waist high, flaming cupboard. He jerked away from the heat instinctively. Lying on the floor, supine and still for a moment, he allowed his tangled thoughts to unravel and his next move to crystallize in his laden mind. He could hear a woman screaming over the cacophonous roar of fire and mingled thumping of music from above, then Tara’s angelic face appearing, inches above his.

“LEAVE HIM ALONE!!” she screamed, gripping his arm tight and hauling him with all the might she could muster, pulling him to his feet.

“Oh you BITCH!” Ed spat. “You two are welcome to each other. I hope you enjoy the rest of your short lives together.”

His hand disappeared into the recess of his suit jacket pocket and reappeared clutching a compact yet powerful looking handgun. He held the weapon before him in both hands, jerking it from side to side; aiming for Richard, then Tara in turn. Meanwhile the fire had spread throughout the lab, creating a searing wall of orange flame between the duelling Arachnoids and Ed.

“C’mon Ed, put the gun down, it’s not worth this.” Richard stepped forward tentatively, swatting rivulets of sweat from his forehead. The heat was intense, almost unbearable.

“This... is everything I have. I’ve been working on this project for years.” Ed jabbed the gun at Richard, who flinched. “Now you’ve destroyed everything.”

There came a rumbling clang as the heavy-set door man descended the steps. He teetered to a halt at the bottom, holding out an open hand, palm up as though fending off the heat. He glanced at the scene and quickly pulled a lock-knife from his pocket, snapping it open.

“Boss, we’ve got to get the hell out of here.” He laid a hand on Ed’s arm, but Ed batted his hand away.

“Not until they are dead. Cut them! I want to see that prick bleed!” he ordered, jabbing a finger accusingly at Richard and backing away.

The hulk held the blade in a reverse grip in his meaty hand and strode forward. He knew time was short and intended to make quick work of

Richard. He raised the knife, swinging it down in an arc, aiming for the cowering man's throat. Richard raised his arms defensively and ducked, anticipating his painful demise. Seconds passed and nothing happened. Richard raised his head slowly.

The hulk stood over Tara's heaped form, surrounded by swelling pool of dark, arterial blood. A wide gash ran from her jaw-line to her collar-bone and her face remained impassive and still.

"Ahh shit!" he snapped, showing no remorse as he raised the blade once again for a second attempt at killing Richard.

This time, he did not have time to bring the knife down before a large, black shape rocketed from the blazing wall of fire, cannon-balling into the hulk, knocking him to the ground and quickly seizing the bouncer's throat in its oversized pincers. Nora hefted his bulky frame into the air with little effort while he grunted and kicked the air futilely. The Arachnoid squeezed, severing the hulk's head; his body dropped to the floor, splashing gouts of blood into the air. Nora tossed the door man's head into the blaze.

Richard caught a movement in his peripheral vision as Ed took aim, squeezing off a couple of panic shots, missing his target completely. Richard sprinted across the short space between them, ducking and sinking his shoulder into Ed's gut, driving the wind from him. The gun skittered along the floor, disappearing into the flaming inferno a couple of feet away. Ed clutched his midsection, rolling to one side, doubled over in pain while Richard scrambled to his feet, making a staggered beeline for the wrought iron stairs.

He gripped the rail to propel himself up the stair as quickly as possible; but as soon as his hand touched the rail, he yanked it back quickly, yelping in pain as the flesh of his palm blistered upon contact with the searing metal.

"No, please. I just wanted to make us superior. I wanted to join you; I would have joined you, Nora. Please forgive me," Ed wailed while the gigantic spider which was once his wife gazed down upon him, unmoving.

Nora bowed and lifted Ed very gently between her pincers. Ed didn't protest, he was at the creature's mercy. He allowed his creation to raise him into the stifling air, stroking the tattered remnants of his wife's face and cooing soft words to her. When Ed realised the Arachnoid's intentions, he began to struggle but Nora's grip was far too powerful. He begged, wailed and finally screamed as Nora walked into the burning laboratory.

Richard fled up the iron steps into Ed's office and out into the club with no hesitation. He fought his way through the jostling throng in the direction he hoped led to an exit. A solid, bony elbow collided with the side of his head, temporarily blurring his vision. He didn't stop to ponder if the blow was intentional or not, he had no time to waste in a confrontation with his aggressor, he just wanted out of the doomed club into the cold, night air where he could soothe his burning lungs.

He reached the emergency exit, kicking the panic bar and throwing the door wide as he staggered out into the chilly midnight air. Disoriented, he stopped for a minute to catch his breath, vaguely aware of a high-pitched whooping of the fire alarm, which he initially mistook for the thumping drill of dance music.

All at once the music died, giving way to the shrieking fire alarm and cries of fear. Richard spun. The crowd surged towards the exits en mass, pushing, shoving and clambering over each other in their haste to escape the horror. There, at the rear of the vast dance floor, three towering Arachnoids waded through the fleeing tangle of people. The huge creatures picked up bodies at random, snapping limbs off and tearing torsos in half with their razor-sharp pincers. The rear doorway leading to the basement looked like an entrance to the very pits of Hell itself. Vast orange flames licked the ceiling, consuming the walls and fixtures rapidly.

Another thunderous explosion rocked the ground, yanking Richard from his horrified daze. He ran for his life, throwing himself recklessly into the narrow alleyway, catching his jacket on the rough wall and tearing it to tatters. But that didn't hinder his speed or his determination to be clear of the doomed nightclub.

Fear-laden screams echoed through the alleyway as Richard rocketed out into the main drag, shaken and bedraggled. He shot across the road, narrowly avoiding being struck by a speeding taxi. The driver rolled down his window, shaking his fist angrily and unleashing a torrent of expletives, until his eye was drawn towards the rising pillar of soot and orange flame above the buildings adjacent, then he drove on, maintaining break-neck speed.

Richard leaned back, sliding down the exterior of a twenty-four hour cafe and looked on as the remaining horde of clubbers emerged hastily from the narrow mouth of the alleyway, dragging, carrying and aiding the injured, who had been caught in the blast.

In the minutes that followed, the emergency services arrived and the street was cordoned off with thick plastic streamers of neon police tape. Richard watched from a safe distance. He fought a battle of emotions. Ed had been his friend; hell, Ed had been his best friend for many a year and he felt a solid lump in his gut for the loss. On the other hand, the suffering he had caused Nora, the kids and the dozens of other people caught in the fire, not to mention those abominations he had created in the basement, was inhuman.

Blackened cinders and burning embers danced in through the air like confetti, coating the ground in a greasy film of ash. Richard reached out, plucking a piece of fluttering card in mid-air between his thumb and forefinger and extinguished the glowing corners. He held the small card closer for inspection, shaking his head gently when he recognised the *Club Arachnoid* logo.

Club Arachnoid,
166 ½ Sandwell Street,
Glasgow

Richard flipped the card over. The colour drained from his face.

Club Arachnoid,
485 Keddington Road,
Scunthorpe

THROAT TICKLE

Gene Stewart

Over the course of a lifetime the average sleeping person swallows 9 to 19 spiders. Spiders fall or crawl in, only to be snarfed, chomped, or swallowed whole. All spiders are venomous, to a greater or lesser degree. All spiders eject tiny barbed hairs from their thorax when threatened. These bore into skin and create irritation and possible anaphylactic shock, which can be fatal.

One is reminded of the old nursery rhyme about the old woman who swallowed the fly, I don't know why she swallowed the fly; perhaps she'll die. She swallowed a spider that wiggled and jiggled and tickled inside her, too. Epic battles on a small scale are sometimes the bloodiest.

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Eve woke staring straight up toward the ceiling. Without her glasses all she could tell was something bobbing as if suspended over her face. When it moved its eight legs she knew instantly it was a spider descending on its strand of silk. It was in dropping elevator mode directly toward her face.

With a shriek Eve swatted at it and rolled to the left, sending her hurtling off the bed onto a cold hardwood floor. She took the sheet, blanket and comforter with her. These offered slight padding followed by an avalanche of possibly spider-laden covers. She thrashed free of them and stood shivering and trembling both. She kept shuddering, gooseflesh erupting all over her as she swiped at herself. Each tiny tickle on her skin sent her into a frantic slap dance. A frenzy of itching accompanied each delicate touch.

Feeling attacked and contaminated, she shook out each piece of clothing, hard, thrice, then dressed as quickly as possible. Gathering the bed clothes, she gazed for a moment at the ceiling above it, seeking signs and portents of further attack. She saw neither spider nor trailing silk thread. Scanning the corners, she found no clot of spider nest, no cobwebs doing their passive fishing for insects.
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This relieved her. Stray spider, she thought, up from the basement rafters under her feet. Exploratory foray, nothing to worry about. She got on with her laundry and decided to pull the bed from the wall and do some serious dust-bunny carnage, too. Clean the room thoroughly.

She liked a fresh, clean place to sleep. She even opened a window to trade stale for fresh air. Freshening things would keep spiders at bay.

Had the spider come in through the window?

She went to look at the window. There were no spider-accommodating gaps, no tears in the screen, no portal for invading her domain. She shut the window anyway and went to make a pot of tea, some toast, perhaps an egg or sausage. She had to be better at remembering to eat, she reminded herself. No one was going to fend for her and that nice young woman would not be around again until next Wednesday.

What day was this? Checking a calendar, she tried to recall which television shows she had dozed in front of last night. She thought it was something detective-y, but then, weren't they all these days? Or spies. Perhaps lawyers but certainly not doctors. Kildare had dared be killed by ratings decades ago, she thought, smiling in appreciation of her own cleverness.

Now there was a reference none of her nieces and nephews would get.

She sighed as she noticed the loose tea was running very low. She supplemented with a bag, knowing it would lessen the flavor but feeling brave, soldiering on in the face of adversity. It heartened her to think of herself as tough, of a generation lost now to raucous hip-hop, bling and what not, the kind of gnarled, doughty person who had kept calm and carried on.

How she missed Howard.

He'd turned bright red, said, "High end explosives," then went face down into a chef's salad, never to draw another breath. Hardly a way for a war hero to go but then, Howard had not been a hero, strictly speaking. He had served, though, doing signal intelligence work that saved countless lives. So what if he had never gotten the chance to face a bracing hail of enemy bullets? Made him no less a hero in Eve's estimate and she still loved the cuddly old grouch even though he was long in his grave. She missed talking with him and still did have conversations with his empty armchair, which she never used but could not bring herself to clear away. What was a bit more floor space compared to memory?

She switched on the television to keep her company and was confronted by the image of a skull and jumbled skeleton in a dusty coffin clotted with cobwebs. It was as if Howard had popped in for a visit. Eve jumped and fumbled for the remote controller, having sat in her spot at the end of the couch automatically when the horror movie startled her.

Pressing Guide, she scanned for something more palatable and found a cooking show with a cute-faced, plump little woman whose smile radiated confidence and calm. Eve liked her.

That image of a skeleton in cobwebs bothered her, though. How had the spiders gotten into a sealed coffin? Could they do that? Did they? Why would they make their traps in the deep dark of a buried coffin rather than, say, in the corner of a barn where flies would congregate to catch the after-lunch buzz?

Worms got in, she thought.

Another shudder went through her. This was morbid. The voice in her head had been rumbling, similar to her father's. A rough voice, vocal cords corroded by whisky and smoke. It was the kind of voice the horror movies would choose for their unseen narrator or perhaps for the monster in the shadows.

Eve glanced over her shoulder. She saw the foot of the staircase, a bit of wall and no lurking killer. Still, her nerves rode her hard now. She galloped inside, despite remaining motionless outwardly. She feared, somehow, that moving would give away her position and allow the stalker to pounce.

What stalker?

Really, old girl, get a grip on yourself, gather yourself, you're shattering because a cute wee spider greeted you upon awakening.

Her tea, tepid already, tasted stale and left an oddly plastic flavor in her mouth that the toast and jam did not dispel. She decided against an egg. It would sicken her the more and really, toast and tea with good strawberry jam should do the trick.

Sitting now at her kitchen table, with no memory how she had gotten there, she noticed it was getting on toward lunch time already. She was not the least hungry and could not believe the time had flown so dramatically, fled from her as if she wielded a knife. The notion of her in the print blouse and baggy slacks chasing Time, in the form perhaps of the old man in a toga carrying an over-sized hourglass and walking staff, made her laugh.

She got up to check the laundry and found a congealed mass of it in the washer, ice cold. The spin cycle had long since spun to a halt, its dervish act complete. Was the beeping sound it emitted when finished broken? Or was her hearing getting as arthritic as the rest of her?

Her fingers hurt as she pulled the sheet and blanket from the washer to stuff into the drier. She remembered to toss in one of those sheets impregnated with scent and softener. Eve disliked touching them and swiped her fingertips on her slacks.

Her fingers touched something on her leg and she jumped, gasped, and glanced down. Sure enough, a fat old spider was flung from her by her brushing hand, only to scurry under the drier. She did not have time to tap her shod foot down onto it. Her heart beat so hard she had to lean on the washer. Catching her breath proved difficult. It was as if one of her more rambunctious nephews had somehow gotten inside her and was now pounding his way out.

She started the drier and walked on shaky knees to the living room, where she sat on the couch again to rest. Just as she got comfortable and reached for the remote, she remembered lunch. It was a chore she'd rather skip but the new Spring day was so sunny as it tumbled in through the windows and the promises she'd made to her daughter and son still rang in her inner ear, so she harumphed herself forward, jack-knifing to her feet.

Dizzy, she steadied herself by pressing a palm onto the wall. It came away sticky and, frowning, she examined it. It was something cottony, almost like candy floss, yet it had no odor. She noticed black dots in it.

She glanced at the wall again and saw further black dots spreading in all directions from more of the sticky stuff on the wall. A ripple of dread tsunami'd over her flesh just ahead of her realizing what she was seeing: Spider sac, with baby spiders set free by her inadvertent touch.

She looked at her hand and saw the dots moving there, too. Shrieking, she ran into the kitchen and let water run over her palm, clearing away the cotton-like stuff and its moving black specks.

Standing at the sink empty-minded, she came back to awareness drawn by the sound of the faucet running. She shut it off. She was cold. She shivered. She also saw that it was well after noon now. Had she eaten lunch?

She decided to have some toast and jam, with a new pot of tea. That would tide her over and she would have a good supper, although what that

would be, and whether she needed to start prepping for it, she did not know. What would that cute little television cook be doing right now? Probably smacking the flat of her knife on garlic and laughing at how she talked to her own food.

Her fridge looked empty enough for her to climb into. She wondered if spiders got into fridges? If they wormed their way into sealed coffins, surely a fridge would pose little challenge for the artful little monsters.

Another tickle, this one on the back of her left knee, made her reach down to scratch at it. She imagined the spider crawling onto her shoe, up her ankle, which would not feel the tickle thanks to neuropathy's numbness caused by her poor circulation, which is why her hands were so cold all the time. The spider would then have crawled up her leg and the first spot on her where sensation bristled was the back of her knee. Had it bitten her without her knowing? She considered taking off her slacks to check, but needed more of a mirror than she had just then. A trek up the stairs to her full-length mirror on the inside of the closet door in her bedroom seemed daunting and her concerns silly.

Without remembering how, she was sitting at her kitchen table now, cold cup of tea at hand, with a half-eaten piece of dry toast and an empty jar of strawberry jam sitting open to one side. She brushed bread crumbs into her cupped left hand, then put them into the cold tea. Standing, she cleared the cup, saucer and small plate from the table and rinsed them. Keep things tidy, she thought. It's best to stay ahead of things, rather than let them accumulate.

A stray strand of her grey hair touched the back of her neck.

She yelped, slapping at herself. Where were these spiders coming from? It was driving her mad and she found herself gasping again, heart going like a beer truck with no breaks on a steep downhill slope.

She coughed. A tickle in her throat persisted and she coughed again.

The thought that came to her at once made her gag and shiver so hard the convulsion of revulsion nearly flung her to the floor: She'd inhaled a spider.

By concentrating she could feel it in there, wiggling. Its crafty little legs poked and prodded the delicate interior flesh of her throat; she could tell it was making itself a nest, going to put an egg sac right in her oesophagus.

Terrified, she tried to call out but managed only to cough again.

This would not do.

Outside the window set above her kitchen sink the world had gone from bright sunny Spring day to humid dark Spring evening. It was, by the looks of it, well past dusk. No one, she realized, was coming to see her today.

No one would help.

She could call her son or daughter but they'd be so busy with their children's soccer or basketball or baseball or football or whatever mad activity they were currently immersed in. They would be impatient with her, patronize her, condescend to visit tomorrow or later, if they got the chance. If she could be wedged bodily into their oh-so-important over-scheduled lives.

She did not want that kind of humiliation. She was a soldier, she would keep calm and take care of this damned intrusive spider in her own way.

She would kill it.

Eve coughed again, finding it difficult to breathe now. It was as if her air flow was being filtered. She knew by what. That damned spider's egg sac was blocking her throat.

She stood braced at her kitchen sink, thinking. Panic rose in her like an inevitable tide. All her joints ached like rotten teeth. All her balance was in her feet and legs as her head spun wildly in what her own mother would have called a tizzy. Eve wished Howard were there with her.

That throat tickle maddened her. She tried clawing at her throat but this only scratched away outer skin. It did nothing to alleviate the itching tickle. Coughing was almost nonstop now. It exhausted her. She had to do something to rid herself of this.

She gulped tap water from her rinsed tea cup but this only seemed to encourage the tickle. She nearly choked on water when an irresistible cough erupted mid-swallow. Spraying water onto the window, she thought, Oh, it might rain outside later, too. This made her want to laugh, to giggle and a cold voice in the far back of her head told her she was becoming giddy and would soon pass out if she did not do something about the throat tickle.

She had to get in there.

She tried cramming her fingers down her throat. This only made her vomit a little tea into the sink. It further dizzied and exhausted her.

Without much of a coherent thought she reached for the chef's knife, drawing it from the block as if pulling free the sword from the stone. She thought of poor Mary, Queen of Scots, having to endure three botched swings of the executioner's axe, her wee dog, a west highland white terrier, bursting from beneath her skirts as her bladder let go. The dog had escaped into history's fog, its fate unknown.

The point drove in the deeper when she fell face first down onto the knife she had stuck into her throat in order to kill the spider. This forced the wide blade through the back of her neck, severing her spinal column and, the coroner assured her son and daughter later, almost certainly providing her an instant, painless death.

He could not explain the tea bag he found lodged in her throat but thought perhaps she was hungry and unable to fend for herself, as her body showed signs of malnutrition.

Her place sits empty now, cobwebs in the corners of grimy windows, spiders congregating in musty rooms building webs for unwary insects or any other prey that strays too close.

MY NEW PET

Matthew Wilson

Mom and won't let me have a pet at home
When I found the hurt puppy at the side of the road
She killed it with a hammer. Homes were for people
I have always loved animals more than people

None of them have shouted at me. None have hated me
In the woods at the back of our house... I sheltered
There are rabbits to feed and abandoned cats to play with
It was there I found my new pet. The Spider.

I thought mom would never find it. It is very small
But when she found the matchbox, she screamed
My pet escaped under the floorboards
To teach me a lesson she burned my clothes and games

I only have my book on every animal remaining
Page twelve says this species is rare, very poisonous
With the matchbox destroyed, I'll make a new dark home
I'll wait till Mother sleeps and put the spider in her ear

Then I can have all the pets I want…

PRESENT WEB

Kerry E.B. Black

Working Christmas Eve paid time and a half. The clock marched its skinny arms around the round face in unyielding progress as Marina Petrov scrubbed floors and shined silver. The dining table set with translucent white china glistened under the hand-polished crystal chandelier, each prism reflecting the glorious light. The final piece of silver shone, perfect. Marina set it in its place on the linen-covered buffet.

"Perfection is required," the project lead explained on hire. Marina thought it looked pretty close if not perfect.

Decorated trees glittered in all eight of the first floor "common" rooms. Boughs of evergreen wrapped with red and gold velvet ribbon hung in the entry, spicing the air with the wintery outdoors. Under every tree, presents wrapped in metallic-sheened papers, bound with filmy ribbons and bows waited expectant.

She walked to the door that blended with the mahogany wainscoting, its Tiffany stained glass depiction of Aquarius disguising the utilitarian hallway beyond. White, grey and black hexagon ceramic floor tiles and white painted plaster walls led to supply and dry closets, the pantry, china and silver rooms and the kitchen. She bent to deposit the silver-polishing rag into the laundry chute, but a spider in its transparent web barred the entry.

"Oh, mistress wouldn't like you," she said. She entered the adjacent powder room and removed a Dixie cup from the sink cabinet. She knelt at the laundry chute and scooped the spider with the cup and placed a paper over the mouth to keep the arachnid inside, dropped the cloth where it belonged and gathered her purse and coat.

She wiped her brow with the back of her wrist. The antique wall clock read three-thirty. She still needed to get home and set up her own tree before her children woke in the morning.

Her stomach lurched, imagining disappointing them. Tradition dictated the tree be a big part of the Christmas morning surprise. She

grabbed the Dixie cup, careful to keep the paper atop and, keys in hand, walked to her car.

The wind lashed at her face and froze her breath within her throat. Tears sprung to her eyes. She hunkered her head closer to her body, slumping her shoulders as she hurried to unlock the car. She blew on her hands as the engine warmed.

"Too cold to leave you out there," she said to the spider in the cup. She set the diminutive paper cylinder in the center console's black plastic cup holder. She blew on and rubbed her hands together before pulling the gear shift to drive from her employer's large house in its upscale neighborhood to her own middle class suburb. A small fir tree sat in the corner of a local lot. She opened her trunk, dropped the back seats flat and struggled to slide the tree inside. Needles left a trail marking its passage. She dropped $5 into the lot's "pay here" honor box locked with a bicycle chain to a folding table under a small white canvas tent.

"Get inside," she grunted. She closed the trunk with a frigid crunch, then leaned against to catch her breath. "Home," she sighed. "I have so much to do."

At home, she pulled the tree up the wooden stairs, over the front porch and into the living room. She set it upright and watered it.

She returned to the car to retrieve stashed presents from their hiding places under the seats to scatter under the tree. On the last trip, she grabbed her purse, then pursed her lips. "I guess you're coming with me," she said to the cup. "Can't rescue you to leave you freeze, not on Christmas Eve."

"Why all of this has to be done the night before Christmas…" She shook her head. Because it was how her family always celebrated. When she grew, her sisters and she woke to find a transformed living room.

Her throat tightened. Holidays brought nostalgia. She wanted happy memories for her children.

She hung white lights on the tree and stuffed stockings hung from a mantle surrounding a bricked-up fireplace.

"How does Santa get down the chimney when it has bricks blocking the opening?" her youngest girl asked.

She knelt in front of the tot. "He uses magic to walk right through."

The girl's eyes widened. Later, the girl asked her oldest sister to sleep in her bed. "Please, that Santa ghost might come in here."

Marina nodded.

“Maybe rest a minute, then get the decorations up.”

A minute became “Momma, momma, wake up! It’s Christmas! The Santa Ghost came!”

She bolted up, her heart beating a panicked pace.

“No, I didn’t decorate the tree!” her thoughts screamed.

Her tree girls milled around the tree in an expectant dance.

“That one says me!” the littlest squealed.

“Our stockings are stuffed!” said the middle child, grown enough to strive for maturity, but still in secret a youngster. The eldest smiled at her siblings over crossed arms.

The tree glowed.

“How?” Marina wondered. “I didn’t decorate it, just hung lights.”

It looked like angel hair dripped from the dark green branches. Marina rubbed her eyes, then rose from the couch. Her muscles protested from lack of sleep, still she leaned closer to examine the tree. The decorations reflecting the lights she hung the night before shone delicate and organic. “Spider webs!” she realized. She glanced around for the Dixie cup. It sat on the side table, paper askew.

“Just like the old family legend.” She thought. “Thank you, friend spider.”

The oldest girl made a pot of hot chocolate with a sprinkle of cinnamon and Marina set orange sections on a tray. The children set to opening the presents, papers flying like a colorful, large-flaked blizzard. Their laughter and joyful exclamations rung through the small house.

A knock on the front door stopped their enjoyment. Marina opened the door, a sleepy smile on her face.

Two large, uniformed police men stood on her narrow wooden porch. Their black presences loomed. Marina’s eyebrows knitted above tired eyes.

“Ms. Petrov?” the officer on the right asked. His brass rectangular name pin said Officer O’Malley. The other’s read Officer Shelton. She nodded, tilting her head to the left.

“Yes?”

“You will need to come with us to the station. You are under arrest.”

While the cold from outside did not shake the comfortable dream of the morning, this statement snapped her to full awareness.

“Arrest? Whatever for?” Her mind raced. The tree. But she paid for it; put $5 in the honor box.

Officer O'Malley addressed Marina. "Your employer has video of you leaving her house last night. She claims you stole from her."

"Stole? I didn't steal anything! What does she say I took?" Marina's head buzzed and ached as she forced herself to recall the nine-hours she spent at work last night, polishing and scrubbing.

Officer Shelton peered around the corner, looking into the living room. "You girls okay?" He asked in a cheerful tenor. The three stood in a stiff-backed arm-linked line, regarding him with colorless faces and wide, confused eyes. Their fear broadcasted from their faces.

"Is your husband at home?" Officer Shelton asked.

"I have no husband. He left when the youngest was born."

He looked grim. He cleared his throat. "Kids, your Mom's going to come with us for a little bit. Can you be in charge?" He pointed to the eldest. She nodded, her lips set in a pale line.

"No, I didn't do anything wrong." A mounting panic rose within her. She looked at her girls standing before the miraculous tree in their humble living room and then at the officers looming like a rainstorm on a picnic Sunday in June. Her rough, calloused hands raised, open palmed, universal surrender. "Please, I don't understand. How can I be arrested when I didn't do anything wrong?"

"She said she has you on tape taking something from her house. She's pressing charges."

She strained her neck looking at them. "Please, there has to be a mistake. I didn't take anything."

"We can sort it out at the station. Get your coat, please, Ma'am."

With robotic movements, she did as required. She kissed each of her children. The youngest cried and clung to her neck. The older two looked shocked.

The officers escorted her to the back of their squad car. The seat was unyielding as the cold ground they tread upon. The door slammed with the finality of a coffin lid.

"So much for a relaxing Christmas at home," she thought.

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An alien intelligence tapped into ancient memories. Cavaticus remembered and appreciated that people and arachnids interacted in positive ways at
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times. This Marina kept her warm and did no harm, so she spun webs to decorate the tree as the Slovenian tradition dictated.

The Marina's distress broadcasted clearly when the men in black uniforms arrived with questions and took her from her young and their web. Marina's heart pushed oxygen-enriched blood through thin veins faster. She smelled of salt and fear. Cavaticus clicked her front pinchers, distressed.

She repaid the debt to the Marina with the gift of her webs on the tree as her ancestors did many winters past. Still she knew her other webs at the cavernous house were knocked down and discarded by its mistress. If she remained in that large place, Cavaticus may have succumbed to the poisoned spray or been stomped upon as happened to many of her kin. She tapped her spikey front legs.

She felt certain this other cavern's mistress sent the men to remove the Marina.

On impulse, Cavaticus threw a web and landed on the Marina's shoulder. She accompanied the woman to the police station then, when the Marina pressed her fingers into black ink to produce fingerprints, she cast a thread to travel upon the taller of the officers.

This officer dialed and the voice that answered belonged to the mistress.

"Throw the book at her."

"Ma'am, you have to come to the station to fill out the paperwork, as we already explained."

"I'm not coming down there on Christmas Day. I am celebrating with my family."

"It's protocol," the officer began.

She interrupted. "I'm certain you know your chief is coming to my house later this evening for cocktails. Send whatever needs to be signed with him."

She hung up.

"Man, why are we even holding this poor Petrov woman? I mean, what's she accused of taking?"

"Dunno. Chief said arrest her. We arrested her."

The Chief stood tall and thin, fidgeting with ambition when he came to collect the papers. His tailored suit stunk of Nuevo Rich cologne. He

twirled an onyx ring around his pinky finger while tapping the heel of his Italian leather shoes.

Cavaticus hitched a ride to her old abode.

As he pulled the velvet door-pull to announce his arrival, the Chief felt a sharp pain between his shoulder blades. He slapped his black-gloved hand to the spot, imagining a skittering over his skin, but the heavy woolen outer wear protected Cavaticus from harm.

"Thank you for having me."

"But of course, Chief." A heavy male hand clapped the police man on the back. She felt the breeze of its passage and rode the wave of the reverberating skin.

"I have these papers to sign…"

"Of course, old boy, but how about a cocktail first?"

"Oh, yes, please. I just thought we could get this ugliness out of the way."

"And we will. Jeeves." A discrete, middle-aged butler in white tie bowed from his waist. "Take the police chief into my study, please, and give him the security footage from last night. Sign whatever he needs signed."

"Sir, you or your wife need to sign."

Another clap on the back followed a hearty laugh. "I never sign my own papers!"

"But Sir, it's how it's done…"

The man walked away.

The chief shrugged and followed Jeeves into the wood-paneled study to find the security tapes. They revealed Marina Petrov guilty of removing a spider in a Dixie cup from their residence. The Chief broke into a sweat brought on not only by the effects of the spider bite.

Once in the warmth of the familiar, well-appointed home, Cavaticus leapt to a new vantage, casting translucent strands to stick her in hidden corners. The place crawled with guests. By nature reclusive, Cavaticus steeled herself for an atypical rampage.

She bit the girl child with the golden ringlets in a line across her fat right foot. She cried. The boy in a blue sailor suit, her brother, spotted the arachnid and set to stomping. A thin woman hissed, "Stop. Behave yourself."

"But, Nanny, a spider…"

Cavaticus bit his neck as Nanny whisked him up a staircase. His blood tasted of sugar. The children's cries of pain were discounted as a case of holiday over-excitement. They would be dressed for bed for the last time in their young lives. Her venom regenerated in protruding, hollow fangs.

She hid in the tree. Her many eyes observed. Silvered balls of glass reflected light beside her. She remained motionless, patient, waiting her next fly.

The mistress sauntered with a queen-like air, long cigarette in a carved ivory holder used to point to the tree. "These are imported from Eastern Europe." Her Grecian-inspired gown draped her fashionably thin frame with layers of blue and purple. In a few hours, Cavaticus' bite would turn her shoulder those very colors, but with greater depth. Her venom would infect the smoky blood and produce paralysis until the internal functioning eventually ceased.

She did not cry out when Cavaticus tasted, only jumped a little and slapped at the place the spider no longer occupied. Good form dictated controlled actions by its aristocracy.

She had enough juice for one more bite. She thought of her relatives crushed beneath his feet. The master of the house, in a red velvet lounge coat, hired the white-uniformed men with the toxic spray cans. He alone of the family remained unpunished.

It was simple enough to climb up his designer pant leg and nibble along the top of his argyle sock. He sucked in his breath, but laughed with his guests, trying to rub his leg with his other foot. Cavaticus dropped to the marble floor tiles and reclaimed her abandoned home, assured of work well done.

SPIDER CORNER

Mathias Jansson

We call it the spider corner
A shaded part of our porch
A nice spot to sit and rest
But next day we saw the chair
Covered with a thick layer of web
Crawling with poisonous spiders

A horrifying event happened there last year
A friend of the family made a stop
Stayed for dinner and slept over
In the morning we found the poor devil
I suppose he got up in the middle of the night
Sat down in the chair to take a smoke
He still had the cigarette in his hand
Staring at us with fearful dead eyes
And spiders crawling out from his mouth

We call it the spider corner
That shaded part of our porch

But we never dare to go near it

DO YOU LOVE ME?

Rick McQuiston

When Austin woke, his head felt as if someone had cut it off and used it for basketball. A migraine would have been an improvement. He stood up and rubbed his eyes until the room came into focus, trying his best to ignore the throbbing in his skull.

Foggy but persistent memories from the night before filtered into his already confused mind. He remembered hanging out near the highway with his best friend Ray, waiting for their dates to show up.

Tammy was Ray's girl. She was short and petite with a full head of blond curls and a lively personality to match. They really got along well, so well in fact that they had even begun talking about marriage.

Angela was his date. She was a thin beauty with a silken mane of flowing jet- black hair framing her face perfectly.

He knew he was falling in love with her although he hadn't worked up the nerve to tell her yet. In his life rejection was often a painful consequence of impatience and foolishness, a consequence he had unfortunately experienced before.

Ray had introduced them during a party at his house. He discovered she had two daughters, Eve and Kate, the spitting image of their mother, sharing her gentle personality and sweet, enticing smile. Normally he tried to stay away from women with children, but in Angela's case he found himself making an exception.

As the room came into focus he was able to fully understand his predicament and it was as confusing as it was frightening.

He was in a large, empty room with walls made of some type of metal painted a featureless gray, as was the ceiling and floor. He couldn't see any windows or source of light, despite the fact that the room was illuminated well enough for him to see. He was all alone with nothing but cobwebs to keep him company.

But one thing did catch his attention… the doors. Or more accurately, the outline of two doors on the far wall. Although they didn't appear to be doors. They were not made of wood or metal, but of the same material as

the walls and the hinges and knobs were so faint he had trouble seeing them. They were only thin, nearly imperceptible lines framing the curious openings.

He stood up and waited for his head to stop spinning, knowing his options were limited. Without thinking he let loose several shouts for help and, hearing no response, approached one of the doors.

They were identical in shape and size, about five feet from each other. He examined one of the doors in closer detail. What he saw sent waves of confusion and fear through his body.

The doorknob and hinges were made of cobwebs!

Too afraid to think, he reached out and touched the handle. It felt solid enough but in a surrealistic type of way.

It could be a way out. It could lead to freedom and safety.

He started to turn the knob.

But it could also lead to certain death… or worse.

He released the handle.

The dwindling options available to him danced around in his head. Should he try to open the doors or simply sit back and wait for help? Neither choice was too appealing but he realized that sooner or later he would have to do something.

Fear eventually won out and he flopped to the floor with his eyes glued to the doors for any signs of danger. His head still ached and he could only pray he wouldn't pass out, although sleep was appearing more and more attractive by the minute.

Eventually he dozed off.

She came to him in a dream. Her piercing eyes entranced him as her silky jet-black hair swirled all around, wrapping him up in its delicate embrace.

"Austin," the dream voice asked. "Do you love me?"

"Yes," he heard himself say as if he were separated from his body. "Yes, I do love you."

A short pause was immediately followed by a soft giggle.

"Good. Very good," the dream voice said. "I will see you very soon, my love. Very soon."

Austin jerked awake and rubbed his swollen eyes. The strange dream had taken its toll on him, further weakening his frail condition. He knew

waiting for help was fast becoming an option he couldn't afford much longer.

The two doorknobs gradually came into view. He stood up and stumbled over to one of them, ignoring the voice of reason in his head. He must try to escape or he would surely die.

A thick, dry creak echoed in the room as the door swung open, revealing a solid wall of darkness behind it.

"Hello? Is there anybody in here?" he asked, not particularly anxious for a response.

Silence.

He began to close the door when a small, almost indecipherable sound stirred in the darkness. It sounded like someone, or something, drinking.

And then he noticed a pair of eyes.

They shone with the reflection from the room behind him and were unblinking. And worst of all… they were looking directly at him. Six more eyes then joined the first two and immediately focused on him.

An outline of something the size of a basketball was lying on the ground approximately ten feet away from him. His stomach convulsed when he realized it was a head, a human head… Ray's head. Or more accurately, what was left of it.

Stumbling backwards he kicked the door shut with all of the strength he had left. Whatever was beyond the door pushed up against it violently, causing terrible sounds that reverberated throughout the room.

Thinking quickly he brushed away the cobwebs lining the doors, erasing them completely.

He stood back and surveyed the now empty wall. It was as plain as it had been when he had awoken in the room but the thought of what might be trapped behind it frightened him beyond words. The crashing noises had subsided but the ghosts of their echoes still rung in his ears. He fell to the ground yet again, a victim of exhaustion and hunger, and passed into an uneasy sleep.

When he woke up all was quiet. He reached up to rub his eyes and realized that he could hardly move his arms. Something bound them in place in his lap. He tried to break free but his weakened condition simply would not allow it. And then he noticed what was holding him down… cobwebs!

"Austin, do you love me?" the familiar voice asked.

“Angela? Is that you?”

“Do you love me?” it repeated.

“Angela, get me outta here!”

“DO… YOU… LOVE… ME!”

He didn’t want to answer; it might make his already dire situation even worse.

And then he made the mistake of looking up. Cobwebs were gathering together right before his eyes. He watched in horror as they began to drift down into the room. Their descent was fluid and smooth but with purpose and eventually they settled on the opposite wall, forming the outline of a huge door.

His stomach was in knots. He knew what was happening to some degree but not how, or more importantly, why. He also knew whatever was behind that door was probably going to be very happy to see him… but in the wrong way. He rolled over onto his side and frantically tore at his bonds, but they felt like steel cables.

And then he looked up again. Three more strands of cobwebs were drifting down from above. Two thinned out and turned vertically and one rolled up into a type of ball. He knew right away what they were… hinges and a doorknob. In seconds they had attached themselves to the door.

Further attempts to break his bonds only succeeded in tightening the cobwebs even more and they were fastening themselves to the floor, leaving him more vulnerable than ever.

The door creaked as it opened, filling the room with its threatening echo. Austin could only crane his neck to one side, which was not enough to look away from the door.

“Austin, do you love me?” Angela’s voice asked from the black void.

His mouth was the only part of his body not covered with cobwebs, a fact that didn’t go unnoticed by him.

“I… I can’t move. Please let me go,” he pleaded.

Something massive shifted in the darkness, confident in its strength.

“It would be better if you told me that you loved me,” Angela’s voice slurred. “So much better. You would taste so much better.”

“Angela, pleeeeaase! Let me go.”

He could only pray for it to be quick, struggling to think of happier times. Times when he was a young boy frolicking around in his backyard. Times like hitting his first home run or having his first kiss. Times like

hanging out with his friends… friends like Ray who was now undoubtedly in the belly of some inhuman thing behind a non-existent door made of cobwebs. He could still hear the things violently slamming against the wall where the other doors had been. He guessed that little Kate and Eve were still very hungry, even after they had finished with Ray and Tammy.

He focused on the black square of darkness behind the large door. The face that was beginning to materialize from the darkness was growing larger by the second. Eventually its visage was clear.

It was Angela.

Austin felt relieved in a way to see her, although he knew it wasn't the same girl he had been dating. She glared at him with four pairs of baby blue eyes. The compassion in those eyes conflicted sharply with their real intent. Austin's heart was in his throat when Angela scuttled out into the open room.

"Hello Austin," she hissed through nine inch fangs.

"An… Angela?"

"Yes, it's me," she answered while straddling him with her eight hairy legs. "Did you miss me?" The mockery in her words was plainly evident and stung him like a needle.

Despite his situation, despite what she really was, Austin could not deny to himself that he had loved her, that he still loved her. Perhaps that was why she had kept him around for so long. Maybe her past boyfriends, her other meals, had never, truly loved her. It was possible that she had never experienced actual love before and was having difficulty dealing with it. He knew it was his only chance.

"Angela, I know you're in there," he moaned to the creature. "I can feel it. Tell me it's really you."

Angela paused for a moment, pondering Austin's words. The inner conflict in its mind was reflected on its face.

"Austin, do you love me?"

A tear welled in Austin's eye. His heart ached for the creature to be Angela again, to be the woman he loved.

"Y… yes Angela, I love you," he managed to whisper.

The sharp pain in his side was causing him to become disoriented but he wanted to say the words before he blacked out. They just might save his life.

"Yes Angela, I love you," he managed to whisper.

And then his world went dark.

Angela squatted back on her bloated abdomen and gazed down at Austin. She had truly loved him and she knew it. But she also knew that one needed more than love to survive. One also needed food.

She clicked her fangs together and waited for the venom to begin its work.

SCORPION PARK

Ash Hartwell

The long weekend had been hot and Londoners were making the most of it. Dr. Christopher Wilson was one of those enjoying the late evening sun in Regents Park. He had invited Caroline for a picnic so they could get to know one another, having met at a university seminar where she worked as an administrator and he had given a lecture on arachnology.

They had chosen to eat on the grass close to London Zoo where earlier he had shown her the delights of the arachnoids while she hid behind him, letting out little girly screams that made him laugh. It had obviously gone well as, when they walked to the big cat enclosure, her favourite animal, she'd reached for his hand and when he surprised her with a behind the scenes tour of the enclosure, including an up close meeting with a lioness, she had given him a kiss - it was brief but a kiss none-the-less.

They were lying on the blanket talking about life, the universe and nothing while trying not to think about going back to work in the morning when there was a commotion further down the slope. A small girl was screaming and clutching her foot in obvious pain while her mother had gone into a hysterical fit, screaming and clutching her head instead of comforting her daughter. Then she began pointing at something on the ground before stamping her foot tentatively on the spot she'd been pointing at.

"What do you think that was all about?" Caroline had sat up, shielding her eyes against the sunset.

"I think she was doing an impression of you when you saw that tarantula earlier," Christopher laughed at his own wit until Caroline punched his arm.

"Should we go and see if we can help? I mean, the child has obviously been hurt." Caroline had already stood up and was smoothing down her floaty summer dress. Christopher agreed with her in principle but was less enthusiastic about disturbing their cosy chat. He was left with little choice but to follow when she set off bare foot down the slope.

The hysterical woman had begun pleading for help, her words almost incoherent at first. "Please help me. My daughter... she's been... bitten."

Caroline had already reached the woman and begun trying to calm her down by the time Christopher arrived. He stooped to inspect the little girl's foot and immediately noticed the dark puncture mark surrounded by inflamed red skin and then he turned his attention to the ground where the child's mother had been stamping

His took a deep breath as he saw the culprit's crushed remains then looked up at the two women, trying to keep the anxiety from his voice. "Caroline. Would you call an ambulance please?"

"Okay." She'd already noticed the concerned look in his eyes. "What do I need to tell them?"

"Tell them we have a small child that's been stung by a scorpion." He looked down at the remains and added, more for his own benefit, "And not a normal one at that."

If Christopher had thought the woman hysterical before then he hadn't seen anything yet as she completely freaked out at his mention of a scorpion. While Caroline tried offering the girl's mother some comfort whilst phoning for an ambulance, Christopher carefully gathered up the pieces of dead scorpion, placing them in his baseball cap for later identification. He had thought at first glance that it was an Indian Red scorpion and that had caused him the initial concern, however he was now a little confused. The markings appeared to be that of the Indian Red, the worst species of scorpion to be stung by, but the size was wrong. This particular species varied in size but rarely got to 9 centimetres in length. The scorpion Christopher was delicately cupping in his hat was at least three times that, probably more.

Caroline was attempting to explain to a disbelieving call handler that a child in Regents Park had been stung by the world's most venomous scorpion when several people close by started to scream and shout. They scattered outwards from a small sinkhole which had rent open the grassy slope, leaving an ugly scar which still sucked in the surrounding turf. As Christopher watched, he saw the earth begin to flow upwards out of the hole; a torrent of moving earth spewed out in all directions, defying gravity it surged up the slope.

Then Christopher realised in horror that it wasn't earth but a sea of crawling scorpions. They swarmed across the open ground with their huge pincers snapping the air, the metasoma, bearing the deadly sting, arching menacingly into the air above their head.

He snatched up the child who had already stopped crying and lapsed into a subdued state of shock. She felt sweaty and Christopher could feel she was already struggling to draw breath, her pallor was pale and her lips had taken on a blue tinge as the venom's complex proteins had begun to affect her young hearts ability to pump effectively, starving her body of oxygen.

"We need to get out of here now!" he shouted at Caroline and pointed at the deadly tide scurrying towards them. She took one look in the direction he indicated and stopped in her tracks, the woman's phone falling to the ground as she looked at the terrifying swarm. Christopher had started to run in the opposite direction, the little girl hanging limply in his arms but he spared a second to take one quick glance over his shoulder. Caroline was standing barefoot in the direct line of the scorpions. Her legs, paralysed by fear, refused to move.

"Caroline!" His scream was loud enough to jolt her brain into action and she turned towards him. To Christopher her movements appeared to be in slow motion as she struggled to get a grip on the lush green grass, her legs pumping up and down on the spot as her hand gripped the other woman's wrist, tugging at her.

Then Caroline found her rhythm and accelerated. She had taken the other woman by surprise, losing her grip as the woman stumbled to the ground. Caroline turned to go back and pull the woman to her feet but the reddish-brown tide had already overtaken her, crawling over her legs, their stings stabbing wildly into her skin while their razor sharp pincers tore the flesh from her bones. For a second she had looked pleadingly at Caroline, then turned her eyes towards her lifeless child just as she had begun to convulse. The massive amount of toxin in her system had caused her muscles to spasm then she'd vomited a fine pinky coloured froth before collapsing under the voracious tide of angry arachnoids.

Christopher was running hard with the little girl bouncing around in his arms. He could hear Caroline just behind him, her breath coming in sort sharp gulps as she fought back the tears. He needed her to focus, to stay with him. He yelled over his shoulder, "Stay with me, babe!"

A few seconds later she has caught him up, her long legs eating up the ground. "Bit presumptuous, Dr. Wilson," she shouted back with a hollow laugh. "As first dates go I've had better."

Christopher realised the humour was just a simple psychological defensive mechanism but he was grateful to hear it. "But I don't expect you've ever had a more exciting one," he replied, trying to smile reassuringly at her with the unconscious child held tightly to his chest. He knew she was slowing him down but she was his responsibility now. Her mother was dead but somewhere out there was her father. Maybe even her grandparents.

"Where are we going?" Caroline's words were rushed; garbled out in one short breath before she sucked in more air.

"The zoo. We have Prazosin and a phone in my office." Christopher felt the little girl's body convulse violently in his arms. "Wait!" He stopped running and turned to look back. They were sixty or seventy yards from the sink hole and he couldn't tell if there were still scorpions emerging from its depths. Scattered around the picnic area that was usually teeming with Londoners enjoying themselves were a number of bodies, Christopher counted ten before his attention was drawn to an old couple about half way up the slope. The man was trying to help his wife climb the slope but her legs were already covered in a reddish-brown mass of scuttling scorpions. As Christopher watched, the insects totally engulfed her as they dragged her to the ground, the grey haired man still frantically beating at their shiny armoured shells even as they swarmed up his legs until he too fell to the ground, writhing in pain as their barbed stings tore into his flesh.

Caroline was checking the girl's pulse her fingers gently pressed against her delicate throat, "Chris, she's dead." Her voice was no more than a whisper and a solitary tear rolled down her cheek, leaving a thin glistening line across her lightly tanned skin.

"No she can't be. One sting wouldn't kill that quickly." He'lowered her to the ground and was checking signs of life. He found none and lowered his head to gently kiss her forehead. "I'm so sorry."

“Chris... Chris, we have to move. Those things are huge; I think one sting would floor an elephant, let alone a child." Caroline was tugging at Christopher's arm, dragging him to his feet. The zoo was close but they still had a lot of ground to cover and she was eager to get moving.

They left the little girl's body lying in the late afternoon sun and jogged towards the zoo's distant gates. They ran in silence each alone with their thoughts. Caroline was scared and acutely conscious of her bare feet. So far they had been running on grass which, although prickly, was not

likely to cut her but soon they would be on concrete - and she couldn't bear thinking about stepping on one of those. She had always had a healthy fear of spiders and snakes, having never dealt with scorpions but today they had moved to the top of her fear list.

Christopher's thoughts were of the scorpions themselves and he needed answers. His thoughts were flooded with questions. Questions he'd never attempted to answer when writing his PhD as deadly scorpions living and hunting as a group was completely unheard of. But then again so were arachnoids the size of his foot. The remains he'd picked up from the one that stung the girl definitely belonged to hottentotta tamulus, but he had never heard of any scorpion species growing to that size. His thoughts turned to the question of their size; maybe that was the key to solving this problem.

In the distance they heard the mixed wailing of sirens as the emergency services closed in on the sort of carnage usually only witnessed in London following a terrorist attack. Christopher doubted they were prepared for what they would find and feared their arrival might simply end in more loss of life. He looked over at Caroline, realising that she was way out of her depth but despite all she had witnessed in the last few minutes, she was still hanging on. Seeing him look over, she gave him a little half smile, her face streaked with tears and black mascara smudges under her eyes, giving her a slightly haunted look. He pointed to a small gate to the side of the zoo's main entrance, and said loudly, "Over there."

As they approached the gate they slowed to a walk and Christopher took out his key card. He passed it through the vertical card reader mounted on the wall, pushed the sturdy metal gate open and ushered his shell-shocked date inside. "Follow me. Sorry, but we're going back to the entomology department."

Caroline shrugged and gave him a weak smile. "I suppose I'll have to get used to it if I'm going to keep you around for a while."

Christopher walked on for a few yards before her words sank in then turned to look back at her. He took a step back towards her but she waved him away, "Not now, lover boy. London needs an arachnologist." She hobbled along next to him, the small stones littering the concourse hurting her bare feet. They hurried along in silence for a while then Caroline spoke again. "I'm getting the feeling you've got an idea."

"It's more of a theory really but I think it will work. About five years ago, before my time here, they had a breakage. It was the scorpion's nursery tank. They didn't recover all the young but it was assumed they wouldn't survive in this environment."

"And you think they did?" Caroline asked, looking over her shoulder, half expecting to see the giant insects clattering after them.

"I think they got into the sewers and found a nice warm area, maybe near a generator for the underground train system. They're a very adaptable species and maybe they've mutated due to sewer gasses or leaked chemicals, or just to survive. The point is, they have and are now working together to hunt larger prey, in this case, us. Adaptable, you see. They probably survived on rats and small dogs, that sort of thing but that couldn't sustain the colony so they began hunting ever larger prey and burrowing ever larger tunnels to move it." They were nearing the Entomology department and one of his colleagues had come out to meet him.

"That's why the sink hole opened up; too many tunnels crisscrossing under the park?" Caroline asked.

"I think so," said Christopher. He was interrupted by his colleague who had a worried look on his face.

"The TV's just reported some incident in the park involving scorpions. Please tell me you've come in to answer their inevitable phone calls. The reports are absurd. Scorpions in London?" He nodded to Caroline as if seeing her for the first time.

"I'm afraid the reports are true, Simon. We've just come from the park and it's horrible out there. They're Indian Reds about a foot in length and they're hungry."

"A foot long Indian Red? Are you sure?" Simon was looking sceptical.

"Oh yeah, I'm sure," Christopher had removed the rolled up cap from his pocket and shown Simon the remains. "This one stung a child. She was dead within ten minutes. They were working together to hunt, like a swarm."

"Shit," was the only response Simon could muster. He had already quickly examined the remains and seemed to agree with Christopher's identification. Overhead, news helicopters had begun to circle the park, the thunderous noise of their rotor blades drowning the distant high pitched clamour of the sirens.

Christopher held Caroline's hand, trying to offer some reassurance as he led them into the building housing the entomology department, with Simon making sure each door had closed tightly behind them. They had just turned a corner when Christopher suddenly stopped. Several of the giant scorpions had already found their way into the building and were scurrying along the floor towards them. They were moving quickly, their senses no doubt aroused by the vibration of their prey. One had run up the wall and was scuttling towards Caroline at head height, causing her to scream.

"Get back!" shouted Christopher, pulling her back round the corner. He was looking around for something to defend them with. He spotted the fire extinguishers hanging on the wall. He grabbed the CO2 canister, pulled the safety tab free and then; as the crawling killers were closing in on him, he sprayed then with the freezing gas. Then he beat them with the metal cylinder, crushing them against the hard floor to be sure they were dead.

Christopher looked at Simon and smiled, pointing to the ceiling, "Helicopters. We could flood the park with dry ice. Once the ones in the park are dead we can pump it through the tunnels and back to their nest."

Simon had started to nod enthusiastically as Christopher explained his plan. "Ok, so who do we phone? This will need to be on an industrial scale and we'll probably just get cut off if we phone up with a plan to exterminate scorpions in Regents Park. I don't expect most of the authorities even know what's happened yet."

"I have a connection in the police we liaise with during university events and student activities. I'll give her a call." It was the first words Caroline had said since the scorpion had rushed towards her head; her voice was quiet and hesitant. She scrolled through her phone contacts and thumbed the hi-lighted number while the two men kept a close watch for any other eight legged visitors. She spoke with the woman on the other end of the connection for a few minutes then handed the handset to Christopher. "The police commander would like to speak to the bug expert."

He took the phone with a resigned smile. "Hello, I'm Dr. Wilson. I'm an arachnologist." Simon laughed when Christopher raised his eyebrows in exasperation. "Yes, spiders and scorpions." He had put the emphasis on the 'and', then continued, "Absolutely positive, feel free to come and have a look yourself if you doubt my identification... Yes, that’s a long way away." He then placed his hand over the receiver and added, "I don't think he wants

to come over." Then into the phone he said, "Yeah, I'm still here. Not planning to go anywhere anytime soon."

He listened to the commander for another minute or so then said, "To be honest, I've no idea. But what choice do we have?" He handed the handset back to Caroline with a smile and said, "They're going with our plan but it'll take a little while to arrange, so let's just sit tight."

"What about the scorpions? Can they get to us?" Caroline was hoping she sounded more matter-of-fact and casual than she felt. She hated creepy crawlies, especially giant ones and the thought of being trapped in the middle of some kind of insect Jurassic Park freaked the shit out of her.

"We'll be fine if we stay in here," Simon replied with a reassuring air of confidence before adding in a slightly more sinister tone, "It's getting dark, they'll be feeding now."

Caroline thought of the little girl's lifeless body lying out there on the grass and shuddered.

SHADOW WEBBING

Kevin Holton

Boot to Spider

Sorry for what's about to happen–
Such a decision is not mine to make

Were things different, you would live
Scurrying on across the floor
Without a second thought

Inside me lies a foot, controlling me
Using my sole to send your soul off

How often did you dance along
Laces, or crawl in me to hide when
Human eyes pried your shadowed corners?

Forgive me, but I cannot look
Good bye, my friend. I'll miss you

From Brown Recluse to Humans

Keep out, *out,* damn it!
Stupid creatures, prodding
Fingers into my home
Don’t you expect my bite?

Please, keep arguments
To yourself—I know
I live in your home
But in dusty corners

Behind the workbench
In the basement you
Never go in. We
Do not ‘share’ space.

Each of us has our own
Corner. You keep to
Yours, and maybe
I won’t have to kill you.

From Widow to Late Husband

Darling, blame me, not biology
Not all kill their loved ones–
My sisters still live happily
Beside men they embraced.

Your smile was just so perfect
Now, rigor set in

Now, you always smile.

From Late Husband to Widow

Baby, blame me, not biology
Rigor's got nothing on this grin–
You, my Shiva, destruction goddess
Oblivion is beautiful.

Sorry to have used you so—
Suicide-by-proxy is not unheard of
I'm glad you thought death was your idea.

THE SPIDER BARON

E.S. Wynn

The letter is simple. *You have been summoned.* Four words. Four words and a signature.

And I know exactly what it really means.

I dress carefully. Silks with ivory clips and silver buttons– years of work in the salt mines. Years of my father's sweat and blood spent on baubles, but they are necessary. I must look exactly the part I am meant to play. I must play exactly as my mother and I have rehearsed since I was a child. There will be no second chances, not for any of us. The old stories make that clear. The spider baron has been spurned before, and every time, the story is the same. So close, but never close enough.

And in the end, failure means our village will burn just as all of the others have.

I try not to think of all those other villages, all those other attempts as I check myself in the mirror. I haven't been outside in years and it shows in the pale, sallow tone of my skin. Carefully applied cosmetics hide blemishes; hide the dark circles and lines from lack of sleep, from worry. Perfect. Exactly the face, the features he prefers. I breathe a quiet sigh, close my eyes, try to steel myself for what lies ahead. *Death,* I shake my head, try to bury the thought, ignore it. *No.* I open my eyes again, look myself firmly in the face. *Freedom.*

Market Street runs from one end of the village to the other. In truth, it isn't so much a street as a muddy lane of ruts and sludge. Crossing it, crossing to the keep where the spider baron lives isn't easy, but I manage to find the places where the mud is thinnest, walk carefully and slowly so as to keep as much mud off of my clothes as possible. When I reach the end of Market Street, I pick up a bouquet of blood-red roses from a crippled old woman who has been waiting for me to arrive. The coin I use to pay is another legacy of father's long hours in the mine and I close my eyes against tears as the old woman accepts it.

At the edge of the village, Market Street leads to a fork where a rough lane splits from the wider, well-traveled road and leads into a stand of trees.

I pause at the fork, and for a moment I find myself seized by the urge to run, to take the roses and flee into the countryside. Certainly the spider baron would exact a harsh punishment upon my family if I were to run, but at least I would be free. At least the village would be spared the fires that will come if I fail.

But even as I hesitate, I know that there is no other option. I have to do what I was groomed to do. I have to play my part. Somehow, I convince myself that it is worth the risk, that even if my actions tonight bring the wrath of the spider baron down upon the village, it is better that we all die together than that we spend even one more year as thralls to his wicked hunger.

And so, without glancing back at my home, without sparing a thought for my bone-thin mother, my eternally exhausted father, I breathe a silent, steadying breath, then push on.

The stand of trees between my village and the spider baron's keep is tall and ominous. Dark needles, almost blue-black, waver like spiny quills in the wind, claw at low-laying clouds with all the hunger of greedy hands until they die, fall to create a tan thatch in the red mud below. Chill air steals up past the clasps and buttons of my clothing, freezes me so suddenly that I have to hug myself to keep from chattering, but still I push on. If I'm to have a chance at this, even the barest chance, everything must be perfect. I must be perfect. I must be as immovable as stone.

In the distance, I hear a chittering, a clicking and I know in that moment that *they* see me. His minions hunt the trees around his home, but they will not touch me, coming as I am. Instead, they will go to him, tell him of my approach. I swallow, hurry along the path. Best not to keep him waiting.

I take another deep, steadying breath when I reach the gate, then abandon my muddy clogs and slip on a clean pair of soft slippers instead. I cross to the thick, oaken panels of the gate, knock firm, strong, as if I don't fear what's ahead, what awaits me within.

Three knocks and then a pause, just as I've been taught. For a moment, there is no response and then the gate splits, creaks open slowly, pulled by long, woven lengths of silken web. I force myself forward, force one foot in front of the other as I stride through the open portico and into the web-choked courtyard of the spider baron's keep. There is no sign of him, of his minions, but I can feel eyes watching me, studying me, tracking

my every movement with alien hunger. Ten breaths and I'm at the door to the baron's home. I don't even have to knock– tension in the webs opens it for me, opens the way into a parlor all flickering candlelight, silken opulence.

And thick, glistening webs.

Hesitation comes before I realize it. I hear the baron's voice, impossibly ancient, cracking, yet loud, rumbling through the keep, through singing chords of spider silk.

“Come in, my child.”

I blink, force myself to move again. The door snaps shut behind me, and as I walk, the candles behind me snuff out suddenly. Ahead, another door opens, and then I see him, *the spider baron,* watching me with ancient onyx eyes set in a face all wrinkles and thin, desiccated skin. His lips creak into something like a smile as he gestures, beckons, and then he speaks again, his voice sending shivers rattling through me.

“Welcome to my home. My, and don't you just look delicious.”

“Thank you, my lord,” I make all the necessary movements, smile; leave no room for hesitation, for doubt.

“Come here,” he beckons again and I cross the distance between us. Up close, I can smell him, can smell the thickness of death in the air around him. I try not to notice as his spotty, black tongue rolls across his thin lips, slips back into his mouth. “Sit,” he gestures, pats one skeletal leg.

My heart jumps into my throat, but I do exactly as he asks, exactly as I have been taught. I sit, but keep muscles taut, ready, don't rest fully on his leg. He smiles wider, traces one bony finger along the curve of my left cheekbone.

“You know why you are here,” he croaks.

“Yes, my lord.”

“And how do you feel about it?”

“I live to serve, my lord.”

“What a healthy specimen you are,” he slides his finger along my jaw, traces soft skin at my throat. Years of training, of preparing for this moment pay off. I don't even shiver. “Will you give yourself willingly to me?”

“Of course, my lord.”

There is a sound, sudden and slick, a slavering hissing, the clicking of quick fangs rattling against one another. I close my eyes, force myself to

utter calmness. Soft lips touch my neck, hunt slowly forward until they find my jugular– and then there is a piercing, a tearing, a sudden numbness.

And then my eyes snap open again.

I have only moments left to act, to live.

One hand slips into silks; yanks loose the stitches on an interior pocket. The blade of silvered glass is in my hands before the baron even realizes what is happening. Lips detach from my neck, trailing blood and there is fear in his eyes, genuine fear as I slam the dagger to the hilt in his breast. I bear my teeth, shout, scream, release all of the fear and anger within me as I stab him over and over again, targeting every one of his hearts, all five of them, then push him hard against his throne, leave him broken and dripping with steaming yellow ichor.

The spiders come even before their baron is dead. Like a wave of black, they chitter across webs, shrieking, baring sharp fangs. The door becomes the perfect bottleneck and as they crowd into the narrow portal, desperate to get at me, I slash them with the dagger, open their crazed faces, lop hook-toed legs off with quick, clean strikes. The sound of their cries, of their hairy black bodies slamming against stone in desperate attempts to get at me is deafening, but still I slash. I cut and rend until the last spider lies dead on the floor of the keep, twitching and broken. My feet, my clothes, everything is soaked in stinking ichor and as I turn back to glance at the dead baron, I breathe an exhausted sigh of relief. What remains of him still steams, searing and scarring the seat of his marble throne, eating holes in his silken vestments, but it doesn't matter. The baron is dead. His minions are dead.

The village is saved.

I keep the blade of silvered glass in my hand during the long trek back to the village, but if any of the baron's minions survived, they don't come for me. When I arrive, when my feet at last touch the mud of Market Street, I'm stumbling, shaking, pale, near death. A child runs into a nearby building, comes back with a trio of men who bind the weeping wound at my neck, carry me back to my home. My parents are standing in the doorway when I arrive and it is my own father's strong arms which carry me up to my room, tuck me into bed. His eyes are full of tears, proud tears and he presses his forehead against mine as he cries, whispers prayers and words of thanks to the gods above.

Darkness comes. When I wake, it is late into the night and I am alone. A storm rages beyond my window, howls and rattles and washes against wood with all the fury of an angry sea. I realize immediately that something is different. I can feel the wound at my throat throbbing, festering even beneath the bandage there.

And that's when I hear him, *his* voice, that same voice, so ancient.

You thought I would be so easy to get rid of.

The urge to sit suddenly upright comes, passes, but I don't move. For one terrifying instant, all I can do is stare, sweat, listen as the voice comes again.

This body will do. Yes, yes, this body will do. The last was getting a bit old, but this one is new and fresh and full of life.

I'll never serve you, I think back, quickly. *I'll stop you. I'll–*

You'll watch as I kill your family, the spider baron says, and even as I try to stop myself, I feel my body rising, pushing off sheets, crossing to the dresser, one hand reaching out, touching the blade of silvered glass. He's in complete control of my body– there's nothing I can do, no way I can stop him.

You'll watch as I cut your father's throat, saw open your mother's wrists. You'll watch as I burn down your home, burn your entire village to the ground and establish a new colony of thralls in another desperate part of the land. You'll watch and eventually you will break and then I will feed on your sanity for centuries upon centuries to come.

THE DOCTOR'S SON

Matthew Wilson

A spider killed Dad. No two ways about it

Sure we didn't get on. So he beat me. So what?

After being fired for operating while drunk, he took it out on me

But I didn't mind as I had my books. Doors to better worlds

Old classics to shelter me from his fists and drunkenness

Shakespeare was always my favourite author

This author has killed more characters than any war of the 21st century

He made worse monsters than spiders. In forests, things with red eyes watched

Did you know Hamlet's uncle slipped his father poison as the old king slept?

Of course he tried to blame a little spider. Of course real life can imitate art

But this time... a spider really did kill my dad…

I don't care who said the bite wound looked like a needle mark.

WHEN THEY STARTED TO BITE

John Kujawski

I should have known I was in trouble after the first spider bite. That was a strange occurrence. I had never been bit by a spider before and I was certainly not afraid of them before they started biting me. One thing I do know is that the whole thing began when I saw that beautiful artist girl for the first time.

It all happened on what I thought was going to be a normal afternoon. It was in the middle of the week, but I had a few days off from work. I woke up that afternoon all alone in my apartment. I wasn't totally alone, though. As soon as I got out of bed, I noticed a spider on the wall. It didn't look very threatening. It was a little brown one with the skinniest eight legs imaginable. They were like threads. It seemed pretty harmless to me and I actually forgot about it before long and went about my day. I didn't even bother taking the little guy outside.

There was one thing I did take outside that day. It was a large trash bag and it was heavy as hell. Lifting that thing reminded me that I needed to start working out or at the very least; I was too skinny for my own good. I took that bag out behind the building where all the trash cans were. I didn't mind doing the task; I just had to watch out for the rats. That was one thing I hated. I didn't care for rodents in general, but the rats were the worst. They always managed to show up when I least expected it and they were ugly as all hell. Luckily, I didn't see any.

Once I threw the bag away, I headed down to University City. That's a small area just outside of the city of St. Louis. I always liked going there because that's where all the artists and musicians were. Plus, there were plenty of places of to eat. I found a parking spot. There were plenty of parking meters available because it was a cloudy day and a lot of people most likely had

stayed home because of it. I happened to like the clouds, though and I went down Delmar Boulevard to see if I could find a pizza place.

I had hoped to hear some good music on my way to lunch but there were no street musicians out that day. The only person I saw was not really a performer. She was an artist. I saw her sitting in a chair near the sidewalk by my favorite record store. I thought the girl was beautiful. She was a stunning, long haired blonde and had an orange dress on that caught my attention right away. She wore a gold watch and I was aware of her her hand as she held her paint brush, stroking the canvas in front of her. I couldn't stop admiring her beauty and I don't think she knew I was watching her. She was focused on what she was doing.

Once I noticed what she was painting, I was really surprised. I don't know what I had expected but it certainly wasn't what I saw. She had painted a large brown spider similar to the one in my apartment but she drew it to fit the entire canvas; the thing was huge. The giant spider didn't scare me, though. I thought it was neat looking. Suddenly the girl turned around and looked right at me. It caught me completely off guard.

She had the most stunning eyes I had ever seen. They were a vivid blue color and she grinned at me in the most evil way imaginable but somehow I loved it. I could feel my heart beating and I could barely breathe for a moment. For some reason, I did the wrong thing, though. I ended up walking away. I suppose I just wasn't prepared for how beautiful she was. The sight of her was truly stunning and I should have said something. I at least should have told her I liked her painting.

It was not a fun drive home after that. I simply wasn't happy with myself. That night when I went to bed, I fell asleep thinking I had made a mistake. Regret is one emotion that I have always struggled with and I regretted walking away from that beautiful artist.

I didn't feel much better when I woke up the next day. I felt worse. I also had a horrible itch in my right arm. I kept scratching and finally I looked at the arm to see what it was. To me, it looked like a spider bite. I couldn't believe it. I figured the damn spider that I had in my apartment had actually bitten me even though I had been nice and let it live. I didn't see the spider around my place at all but I figured that was what happened.

Of course, once I left my apartment again, I couldn't resist taking a drive back to where I had seen that woman painting the picture. That was actually the first thing I did that day. The thing was, I drove past the spot where I had seen her and she was not there. I kind of expected that to happen and could feel a pain in my stomach like I had an ulcer that was acting up. All that regret was eating me alive.

Once I came back to my apartment after that second trip, I could have sworn I saw a spider on the wall again. This time it scared the crap out of me. I didn't want to get to near the thing. I simply wanted it dead. I tried to find something to hit it with and I ended up taking my shoe off. By the time I was ready for battle, the spider had disappeared. I hated the thought that it might still be in the room but I couldn't find the damn thing.

When I woke up the next day, things were just plain terrible.

As soon as I opened my eyes, I realized I was scratching again. My arms were completely eaten up. I had bites all over them and my skin was all swelled up. I looked over at the wall again and saw several spiders. I nearly jumped out of bed in a panic. I couldn't stand the sight of them. I grabbed the first thing I could find; it happened to be my shoe again and started pounding the wall, trying to kill as many spiders as I could. I don't know how many were on the wall. I did kill quite a few of them, though, and when I stopped, I realized I had the shakes. The whole experience had freaked me out.

I sat on my bed for a while and the room was quiet. I felt like I was being punished. I felt like I had made a mistake by not asserting myself with the most beautiful woman I had seen. Plus, I was feeling all sorts of pain and itching from the spiders. I tried to figure out what I should do.

For a while, I just sat around thinking. Then I heard a couple of the neighbors outside talking. They were both complaining about the rats that kept showing up by the trash cans. From what I could hear of the conversation, the rats were becoming a real problem. I didn't like the sound of that at all. It made me want to avoid taking the trash out altogether.

One thing I did do that day was research.. I decided to check out a few spots around town where artists displayed their work. I even thought about going to our local museum. I figured if I could find some more spider paintings that the woman had done, I could get her name and be able to find her. I had no luck, though. I tried every place I could think of that day and saw a lot of neat artwork. I didn't find any pieces that resembled the spiders that the woman had painted.

When I came home from that outing, I ended up falling asleep on the couch. I was extremely tired. I don't think it lasted long, though. I was in the middle of some sort of dream and I could feel something crawling on me. I woke up fast, nearly jumping off the couch but I didn't find anything. What I did realize was that my neck had been bit up really badly. These bites hurt worse than the others and for some reason I kept thinking of the painting the woman had drawn with the giant spider. It felt like I had been attacked by several of them. I was terrified at the thought of seeing more spiders. I needed an exterminator to come by and spray or I at least had to find way to make the spiders go away.

I really didn't want to have to deal with anyone coming to the apartment, though. I figured maybe I could spray them myself and I eventually decided if there was so much as one more incident that

is what I would do. For a few nights, I had a hard time sleeping, but there no more spider bites. I only saw one more on the wall and it made me nervous but it ended up avoiding me.

After a few more nights without an incident, I was able to sleep again. I didn't think much about the woman and the painting anymore, either. I had only seen her that one time and I figured since I couldn't find her, I'd most likely have a chance to meet someone else and I ended up putting her out of my mind. I'd say it was about six months later when I saw her again.

I didn't see her at the same spot as last time. This time, it was at the park. I was pulling into the parking lot and saw her carrying a bunch of papers. I recognized her right away and wanted to have the chance to talk to her but she got into a large black car. Someone had picked her up because she got into the passenger seat and the car went speeding away through the parking lot and out the entrance gate. I was so upset that I had seen her again and missed her for a second time. I was furious with myself for having such bad timing. Once I parked my car and got out, I did notice something, though.

There was piece of paper on the ground and I was sure she had dropped it. I ran over to it to see what it was. It was hers alright, and the artwork was excellent. It wasn't a painting this time. It was a sketch done in pencil. She had drawn a giant rat.

JUST ONE BITE

Evan Purcell

When I first saw the cabin, I wanted to throw up but I held it inside. I was pretty good at fake-smiling. I had a lot of practice.

The cabin was Nick's idea, of course. He chose it off a rental website, but judging by his expression, he didn't expect it to be this rundown and crumbling. I couldn't be sure, but I think he cussed under his breath.

"What do you think?" he asked.

I don't remember what I said, but I do know that I lied through my teeth. And whatever I said, it was the right call, because Nick smiled and kissed me.

We both knew what this was about, of course. This whole trip was just Nick's way of fixing things. He clearly wanted this God-forsaken place to be the cozy little cabin where we rekindle what we once had. It was a last ditch effort and judging by the outside of this crumbling wreck of a place, I had a feeling things were not going to go well.

Lord knows I was right.

Without warning me, Nick lifted me up and carried me across the threshold. I had to cover my face as we entered, because spider webs dangled from the door frame. I shivered and jumped out of his arms. "You carried me over the threshold," I said, forcing excitement into my voice. "Like newlyweds or something."

"You know I'd do anything for you," he said.

And I wasn't sure if that was 100% true. Maybe when we first started dating, it was. But we'd been together six years now, and… thing accumulate. Annoyances grow. He wasn't exactly the man he was six years ago. I wasn't the same either.

"I know you would," I said.

I checked out the ground floor of the cabin. It was one big living room, with a connected kitchen in the back corner and a wooden staircase leading upstairs, presumably toward the bedroom. And every surface was covered with dust.

"Check it out!" he said, and flipped on the light switch.

Nothing happened.

Click. He tried again. Nothing.

"Damn electricity must be out," he said. It wasn't his fault, obviously, but he still sounded like he was embarrassed by the darkness.

"No problem," I said. "I'll go get our stuff from the car. And you can play around with the fuse box. Or whatever you need to do." I patted him on the shoulder and rushed outside before he said anything else. I didn't want to be in there without any lights. If I was being honest with myself, I didn't want to be in there at all. The place was dirty and uninviting.

For the next few minutes, I dragged our bags from the car into the living room. Like any married couple, we had a lot of baggage.

Too much baggage.

I could hear Nick downstairs in the basement, fumbling around with stuff. It sounded like he knocked over something metallic. Maybe it was just the cover to the fuse box.

Another bang.

And then Nick screamed. His voice was a little muffled through the basement door, but it was unmistakably the f-word. Nick never cussed unless he was really hurt. Or really angry.

"Are you okay?" I shouted.

He screamed again, just a noise this time, not an actual word.

Apparently he wasn't okay.

I worried about him. Maybe he stepped on a rusted nail or something. Maybe a raccoon jumped out at him. Maybe… I ran downstairs, into the dark. "Nick! Nick!"

In the dim light, I could see his outline standing in the corner of the room. He was hunched over. When I got close enough, I could see that he was clutching his hand.

"It bit me," he said through clenched teeth.

I reached forward. "Honey. Let me see. I…"

He recoiled at my touch. "You're not a nurse!" he shouted.

"Did you… did you see what bit you?"

"Spider," he muttered, but I could barely make out the word.

"Nick, please. We need to get you to the hospital." Once again, I reached forward. He was swaying on his feet, so I grabbed his shoulders and steadied him.

He twisted out of my grip. It was as if my touch hurt him, as if he couldn't bear the contact. "The hospital…" he said. "Too far away. I… I'll just wait it out."

"Honey."

"I paid for the stupid weekend," he said. "I brought some Tylenols."

"Sure?"

He reached forward and touched me. I didn't expect the contact, even if it was simply to push me away. "Go down to the lake while I wash up. I'll meet you there."

I went to the lake, bringing a beach towel but no bathing suit. I just wanted to sit on the sand and watch the scenery. I waited for an hour, but he never showed.

It was beautiful, though. Even after all the horrible things that happened, I'll always remember that view… The way sunlight sparked along the water's surface. The way the pine trees shifted in the wind. It was a perfect moment. And ever since then, when the fears come back, I try to think of that lake.

But I couldn't stay there forever. I was worried about Nick's hand. I started having second thoughts about leaving him behind like that. What if he passed out and there was no one there to help him? I couldn't stand the uncertainty. So I headed back.

I remember feeling anxious as I opened the cabin door. My body tensed, as if prepared for something to charge at me. Nothing did, of course. The cabin was dead calm.

Nick lay on the couch, wrapped in three separate blankets. His chest rose and fell in irregular bursts. I couldn't hear his breathing, but it must've been raggedy.

"Nick?" I whispered.

His face was covered with sweat. He trembled. Something was very wrong with him. An infection, perhaps. Or something worse.

I noticed a can of bug spray sitting on the table in front of him. It hadn't been there before and I wondered why he would need that so close to him. That didn't matter, though. The only thing that really mattered was that my husband was sick, very sick and I had to help him.

"Nick," I whispered again, a little louder this time.

I held my hand in front of his face and felt his hot breath. I touched his cheek, but it didn't startle him. He was asleep.

This was my opportunity to see his wounded hand. I had to hurry. I had to see before he woke up. I knew that if it was really serious—if it was infected—he wouldn't show me. He'd hide it under bandages until the weekend was over, no matter how much pain he was in.

I couldn't let him do that.

Slowly, I pulled down his blanket until I could see his bandaged hand. He rustled a little, but didn't wake. Carefully, I grabbed the edge of his bandage and began to unwind it.

Right away, I could see the pinkish edge of his wound. If the rest of his wound was any darker than that, he'd need to see the doctor.

I pulled a little more.

His head moved to the side. Still asleep.

A little more.

Nick's entire body shook, as if a jolt of electricity sizzled right through him. His back arched and he shot up.

Kkkkkhhhhhhhh.

He hissed at me!

I jumped back, terrified. He sounded so inhuman. Normal vocal cords couldn't make that sound. It was… wrong. Christ. I couldn't stop shaking.

In my sudden movement backward, I accidentally knocked the can of bug spray off the table. It clattered onto the wooden floor.

"What were you doing?" he asked, his voice impossibly gruff.

"I… nothing."

Did he even remember that he hissed at me?

"Coffee," he mumbled.

"Um, what?"

"I said I need some coffee. I can't sleep the day away." Either his face twitched, or he winked at me.

I got up to mess with the coffee machine. Thankfully, I had a small can of some Colombian stuff at the ready. He always preferred his coffee as dark as it could get. He was kind of a snob that way. So I messed with the coffee for a while, pouring a cup for both of us. When I turned back around, he was sitting at the kitchen table right behind me.

Smiling.

He unnerved me.

His hand was wrapped in a fresh bandage and his face was still moist from sink water. Other than that, he still looked horrible. I wasn't sure how

I'd even categorize the color of his skin. He was pale, of course, almost green, with several blue veins clearly visible.

I silently placed a mug of coffee directly in front of him. I quickly pulled my hand away. I didn't want to be near him unless I had to. "Here you go," I said.

He stared at the mug. "I guess you didn't want to thank me for fixing the electricity."

Honestly, I'd forgotten. Clearly, I had other things on my mind.

"Thanks," I whispered.

"Hmm?"

"I said thanks."

I didn't like this mood he was in. He was sick and a piece of his sickness had somehow invaded his personality. I wasn't just afraid for him; I was afraid of him.

He never treated me like this before.

"Do you, um… We could go to the lake now. If you want…"

He didn't look up from his cup. In a single gulp, he drank the entire scalding coffee. "No," he said.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure," he said, pounding his wounded hand onto the table for emphasis.

I looked down at the bandage. His wound had reopened, a tiny red spot spreading into a bloody circle. But that wasn't what worried me. There were hairs—little, black hairs—poking through the bandage. They weren't natural. Or at the very least, they weren't human.

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The next morning, I woke up and he wasn't in bed. He left behind an outline of his sweat and what looked like little white hairs all along the sheets.

This was wrong.

No man should sweat that much. And where the hell did those hairs come from? I decided then and there that no matter what Nick said, I was going to take him to the hospital.

I put on a new shirt and headed downstairs, not expecting to see Nick smiling at me from the kitchen and certainly didn't expect the smell of
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freshly made waffles.

"Morning!" he said.

God, he looked so much better. His skin was no longer pale, his eyes weren't dark. Honestly, the only thing that was wrong with him was a slight case of bed-head and a fresh bandage on his hand.

I kissed him. For the first time in a long time, he kissed me back and everything felt normal.

Except his stubble was extra rough. It never felt that way before.

Whatever. We were on vacation. He didn't need to shave for my benefit.

He was in such a good mood, I decided to go ahead and ask him about his hand. "Honey," I said. "How is everything? I mean, is…?"

"I'm so sorry about yesterday," he said. "I shouldn't have freaked out like that. But I promise to make it up to you. So go get changed and I'll take you to the lake. For real this time."

"I don't know…" I said.

"Sorry, but I'm not going to take no for an answer."

He was so determined and I was so happy to get my old husband back that I didn't even notice that he changed the subject.

A half hour later, we finished eating breakfast and headed down to the lake. The sun was high overhead and the breeze had completely died. It was the perfect time to swim. Even though I'd been here the night before, Nick still led the way. When we got down to the water, I laid down the towels and he stripped off his shirt.

"Ready?" he asked.

"Ready."

Then I looked up and noticed the bruises. Nick had horrible, circular bruises running along both sides of his torso. They were dark and bulged unnaturally. At first I thought they were signs of an allergic reaction from his spider bite, but the pattern was too regular for that. The bulges formed straight lines from his armpits to his hips. It had to be… something else.

"Where'd you get those from?" I asked.

Nick paused for a second before examining his torso. "Um…" He looked surprised. He had no idea where those marks had come from. After a moment's hesitation, though, he simply shrugged. "Oh well. Let's swim."

And we did. I stripped off my shirt and pants and dove right in. Nick was right behind me. I heard his splash.

The water was colder than I'd hoped, but after a few minutes, I was perfectly comfortable. I submerged my head, splashed around and started swimming little circles around my husband.

Normally, he was such a good swimmer. That day, he wasn't. He hated it. He stayed just a few feet from shore and before I could stop him, he ran back onto dry land. He collapsed onto the sand, shivering.

I swam for a bit more; then I rejoined him. "What's wrong?"

He looked at me, and once again I could tell that he had no idea what was the matter with him. "I… don't know," he mumbled.

So we sat together for a while. I would've preferred to stay in the water for at least a little bit longer, but my husband needed me.

He scratched at the bruises along his sides. They looked somehow darker and more swollen. I didn't say anything, though.

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The rest of the day was peaceful and nice. We even had a picnic in the meadow area behind the house. It was sunny, but not in an oppressive way.

Good-sunny.

Happy-sunny.

The air was almost buttery.

And Nick ate with an appetite I only ever saw around Thanksgiving. After a few minutes of chowing down on my turkey sandwiches—which were admittedly not great—he had crumbs and turkey pieces all down his shirt.

But it was a nice picnic and Nick was in good spirits. I guess I was, too.

While we ate, though, I noticed something weird about his eyes. Like I said, it was a sunny day and the sun seemed to bounce off his eyes in a weird, glossy way. The light reflected off them wrong, the way it would reflect off wolf eyes, or deer eyes, or I don't know…

They were glossy.

Like cataracts.

I didn't mention it because we were having such a good time. Things were finally comfortable between us—so comfortable, like before—and I couldn't imagine ruining things by asking stupid questions.

The sun hid behind some clouds.
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We held hands and walked back to the cabin, talking and laughing along the way. When we got inside, his smile disappeared and he said, “I think I need another nap.” Before I could say anything, he went upstairs.

I stayed downstairs and drew. I had brought a sketch pad just so I could sketch some of the plants and animals I saw. Well, I hadn’t even opened it yet. Not like I saw any animals, though. Just Nick.

For the next few hours, I tried to sketch some of the trees I’d seen. I tried to sketch the lake. For a few pages, I sketched Nick’s face, but those kept coming out wrong. I got lost in my art and before I knew it, I had gone through twenty-some pages in at least two and a half hours.

I should’ve checked on Nick. I should’ve at least called his name to make sure he was okay.

But I didn’t.

And he wasn’t.

Nick screamed. I jumped backward, my nerves completely jangled. It had been quiet just a few seconds before, and now… Nick screamed bloody murder. And he wouldn’t stop.

He didn’t scream words, though, just horrible, pained noises. Grunts. I heard banging, too, as if he were thrashing around up there.

“Nick?” I called.

No response. Just more screams.

“Nick!”

Still nothing. Then the screaming stopped. The banging stopped. It was like there was nobody else in the house, like I was completely alone and even the forest animals were long gone.

“Nick?” I said one more time, and waited.

BAM! Another crash and then the screaming started again. Louder, this time. More painful.

I couldn’t simply wait downstairs and scream his name. I had to do something. Without thinking—without any sort of plan or idea—I raced up the stairs and yanked open the bedroom door.

Or at least… I tried to. The door was locked. It wouldn’t budge.

BAM! BAM! Twice more. He was thrashing in there. I could hear him.

I pounded on the door. “Nick! Please!” I knew that there was something happening to him—inside him—and there wasn’t anything I

could do about it. No matter how many times I called his name, he wouldn't let me in. He couldn't. He…

"Go away!" he shouted.

"What?"

"Drive to the nearest town!" he screamed. I could tell that the words were causing him pain, so much pain, and he struggled with each one.

"But… no, Nick. No. I can't leave you."

He said one more word, but it was much softer than the others. It took me a while to figure out what it was… "Please." He was begging me.

And I wouldn't listen. Not when there was a flurry of noises on the other side of that door. Not when my husband was moaning in pain.

Then the banging stopped. Once again, the cabin was dead silent.

And the door clicked.

Unlocked.

I swallowed hard. This was it. He was letting me in… If he was even there.

I pushed the door open. Light from the hallway streamed into the darkness beyond. I didn't see anyone. Anything.

But I heard clicking. Skittering. Tiny movements all around me.

There was no one in the room.

Slowly, I looked under the bed. I reached forward, pulled up the covers and saw… more darkness. No one.

I looked behind the dresser. No one.

In the closet. No one.

The room wasn't big and there were very few spots for a full-grown man to hide behind. But there was that clicking noise. And it wouldn't stop.

I perked up my ears. Maybe if I could figure out what direction those noises were coming from… Maybe if I…

Oh God.

Those noises—those horrible, unnatural noises—were coming from the ceiling. Directly above me.

I looked up.

And I found Nick. He was clinging to the ceiling, completely naked. His body was twisted and the muscles bulged in ways that they shouldn't. He had four extra arms, smaller and paler than his real arms, sticking out of his torso.

He opened his mouth wide. No teeth. At first, in the dark, it looked like his mouth was a big, black hole. But there was something in there. Fuzzy, black mandibles. They clicked together.

And he hissed at me.

And he jumped.

I dove out of the way. If I hadn't, he would've landed directly on me.

He paused for a second, striking some sort of pose. Trying to intimidate me? I wasn't sure.

His eyes were black, speckled black. They didn't recognize me.

He jumped at me again.

And I was out the door.

Down the stairs.

Oh God.

He was right behind me. Every step I took, he took two. When I was halfway down the steps, he grabbed me by the back of my shirt. I could feel his prickly fingers against the flesh of my back.

He raised me up, hissing and spitting and threw me down the stairs. I tumbled onto the ground, skidding and twisting. I slammed my head against the living room table. For a second, my vision faded away and when it returned, he was standing above me.

He wasn't human. He was something living inside human flesh, warping it into something else. And his eyes—his black, segmented eyes—they looked directly at me. And they looked hungry.

He lunged.

I grabbed the edge of the table and tried to hoist myself up, but I was woozy. My forehead must've been torn open, because blood clouded my vision.

And there was the bug spray, right in front of me. Even with the blood in my eyes, I could see the yellow and black can rolling across the table.

That could be my way out. That could be my only hope of stopping him.

I reached for the spray.

Nick grabbed it first. With one of his new arms, he reached out and pulled it away, just as my fingertips touched its metal top.

That was when my hope left me. My husband was gone, forever gone and the thing that had replaced him took away the only weapon I had.

I was defenseless.

And he was hungry.

God.

With a loud crunch, Nick squeezed the spray can until air and liquid leaked between his fingers. Poison shot through the air.

He raised the can to his face.

What?

I couldn't move. What was he doing?

His movements were shuttery, as if he was fighting against his own body. With a burst of motion, he shoved the bug spray into his open mouth and squeezed until all the juices trickled into his throat.

He shuddered.

Within seconds, my husband, my attacker, crumpled onto the ground, chemicals leaking out of his open mouth. His black eyes never closed; instead, they stared in my direction, but no light reflected off their surfaces.

He was dead.

Slowly, I got to my feet. I stood over him as he twitched for the last time. I was going to throw up, but I needed to hold it in, at least for now.

I didn't want to see Nick this way. I didn't want to see what he turned into. But this was the only Nick I had left.

And the funny thing was… he was right. He would do anything for me.

SPLINTERED THREADS

Matthew Wilson

A spider killed mother. At least that's what father said. Just crawled up her pillow one night, made a home in her ear, and when she sat up in fright; bit her in panic.

Of course I hated spiders while growing up. We lived on a farm in the middle of nowhere, so I always came upon the little devils. I daren't run in the long grass with other boys as I'd scream when my legs crawled with them like itching biting scabies.

I wouldn't go down in the cellar for firewood when Father ordered. There was no dark corner of the house I could be talked into nearing at the promise of hidden Christmas presents. I chose books over other boys who played in woods with those damn webs.

Yet the bookworm died in me when a nature pamphlet informed me - cruelly - that even the most prepared bug-phobe is never more than a yard from one of the eight-eyed devils.

They are everywhere. In the walls. Under floors, waiting in the wind for some poor bumbling butterfly to flutter blindly in their web. They don't eat them right away, you know. The fattest wind them up in silk for later consumption. The thing still lives, watching its killer reconstructing the damaged web. Waiting for the next harmless bug to fill its larder.

Spiders don't chew. For all their ugliness, they lack the appropriate teeth. They inject an acid which melts its prey inside which they then suck up like milk shake. There is no God. Nothing deserving any sense of praise could construct such a death.

Give to me needles in the eyes. Anything but that awful end.

My immobilisation in the centre of any room forced Father to take action. I didn't want to go to a shrink, but it was Father’s house... his rules. Father was a big man. All muscles and sports game. There was no trophy in the sports lodge that didn't have his name inscribed on the base.

He was ashamed of my bookishness. I was a bad reflection on his awesomeness.

Mr. Beckett was a nice old man. He told me his office had been cleaned and there were no spiders as I clutched my feet beneath me like the floor was made of fire. No, I wouldn't lie on the couch. Spiders live inside soft cushioning.

I told him how I'd take a hammer to a nest of them in the back garden. Sure, Dahmer did such things, but I failed to see the craziness of it. The less bugs in the world, the better. The more I squished... the less chance of me being bitten in my sleep.

No, I didn't sleep as often as I could. I guess it was weird that when I did nap, I put sound protectors in my ears. Of course I was tired... over-stressed. But you have to be on alert for the damn things.

"Do you know some Shakespeare villain killed his brother with ear poison?" Mr. Beckett said wistfully one day. The idea took me back. Of course, I'd heard of Hamlet. It had been one of the first things I'd read, seduced by the idea of the bard's genius.

If ever I wrote a story, it would have no spiders. Early in the therapy, Beckett began hypnotism and reverse therapy. But by day three, I could see his mandibles click beneath his skin. They had him, these spiders had collected into the shape of a man and were trying to talk me into relaxing, into lying down on that damn couch so they could get inside one ear and lay eggs in my brain.

I'd not be so easily fooled.

"Did you hate your mother?" he asked on the third day. A standard shrink question, next he'd quiz if I wished to sleep with my father. I admitted we hadn't been on the best of terms since I broke her favourite mirror. She locked me in a cupboard. Full of spiders.

Why couldn't I wear my ear protectors in his office? His dress code was hardly fit for a king.

He took a while plucking up the courage, then: "Did you kill your mother?" After I said nothing for a while, he pressed on..."There seems inconsistencies in your father's arrest. The bite marks on your arms suggest you've been administrating poison to build up some tolerance."

"You have to be prepared," I said, realising it sounded mental. "You think I got the idea from Shakespeare? It's simple warfare 1-0-1." The old bard was safe in his tomb, among the spiders. No doubt they had made a home in his skull, eaten raw of wonderful moonlit scenes in the forest. Now fit only for a nest of poisoned filled eight-legged bastards.

Again he changed tactic: "Why did you come here with a rolled up newspaper?"

A white knight needs his stake against the vampire. The morning edition of blood and scandalous sex is enough to squish this interfering shrink if I wished. I asked him if I was mad and he gave the matter more time than I thought fair.

"We're not here to see if you're insane, we're here to see if I can help," the shrink said, with great certainty. "That's why you're in this cell."

"It's a shrink's office, damn it."

"Then why won't they let you out?"

"I don't like your questions. I can quit this session any time I like. One whack and -"

"And then you'll be a murderer," said the shrink.

I looked up at the window. The shrink hung from a thread from between the sunlit bars. Somehow, he'd broken into my safe room. Each of his hungry red eyes burned into me like a laser. But then he would say that. He did kill my mom after all.

THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE SPIDER

Gary Budgen

As I came out of the chapel after Donald's funeral, I found myself next to a man I didn't recognise. He was small, with sideburns and curly hair. His eyes were enormous; comically out of proportion.

"A lovely service," he said to me, his voice smooth; every word spoken evenly.

"Yes," I said. "Had you known Donald long?"

Through the crowd I saw Donald's brother, Hamish. I should go over. There was a reception back at his house and I needed to find out how to get there.

"No," the man next to me said, "I met him once in Malaysia. I admired him immensely."

I didn't know what to say to that. Donald had been a field worker for an NGO, something to do with conservation. In many ways admirable and at least he'd managed to use his degree in Environmental Studies. I had taken a degree in Architecture and ended up working for the council approving planning applications for conservatories.

I made to say something about Donald, about what he did, but there was something about this little man that was repulsive. He was looking at me with bared teeth in a horrid grin. The teeth, like his eyes, seemed overlarge. I wanted to be away.

"You see," he said, "I'm saying goodbye to this life."

I understood then. This man had some fatal illness that had made him slightly unhinged.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's all right," the man said, "I'm rather looking forward to my next life."

Before I could respond to this, Hamish walked over and touched me on the arm.

"Thanks for coming, Peter," he said. "You can get a lift with my cousin to the house."

Hamish looked haggard close up. The strain of the last few weeks must have been terrible. Donald's death and the whole business of having the body bought back to England from Malaysia.

"Thanks," I said.

The twilight had come quickly and I realise we were all beginning to look grey standing out there in the cold outside the chapel.

I turned to back to the dying man but he was nowhere to be seen.

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I had a few drinks at Hamish's then decided to walk to Golders Green station but as I came out of the house there was a mini-cab waiting. On its side was a telephone number and some odd spirally logo, like a flattened swastika smeared with dirt. I barely took all this in.

"Are you booked?" I called out. The driver had his head down looking into his lap.

"Peter?" he said.

Someone must have booked it for me. So I bundled myself into the back of the cab and told the driver I wanted to go to Manor House and he drove off.

I had never known London so dark. The cab went through all those areas, Hampstead, Highgate, Crouch End, where so many people aspire to live. Yet now it felt like a city of the dead. The houses were set back from the streets in shadow, the trees lending malevolence. The street lighting was feeble. It was so dark.

Then the cab stopped in one of these streets. The driver just sat there and for a moment I stared at the back of his head, his curly hair. A thought came to me as though from somewhere inside that I'd not been paying attention to. The thought was that we'd been talking, that I and the cab driver and someone else had been talking for some time. Yes there had been someone else there. I almost could have said what it was that we'd all been talking about but as I tried to fix the thought it drifted away.

"Is everything ok?" I asked. "Why have we stopped?"

"Everything is fine, just fine."

Now I recognised his voice.

"It's you," I said, "from the cemetery."
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He turned around now; his eyes looked as though they could swallow me.

"I thought we might carry on our conversation," he said.

"Look. I don't know what this is all about but I'm getting out now."

"As you wish."

He did nothing. Just turned away again and stared at the road. I opened the cab door and the cold instantly bit me.

"I'll see you," he said.

But I'd had enough of all of this.

"Look," I said, "I'm sorry you're dying, but this is all a bit too freaky for me."

He turned around again and handed me a card. I took it by reflex and felt the rough hairs on his fingers. I put the card in my shirt pocket without looking at it and started to get out of the cab.

"I didn't say I was dying," he said. "I said I was saying goodbye to this life."

I slammed the door at that and stormed off.

He poked his head out of the window.

"Call me if you feel the need."

I jogged, wanting to be away. When I looked back the cab was still there.

I quickly found a well-lit high street which turned out, bizarrely, to be in Golders Green back where I'd started. He must have driven round in circles. When I got to the platform I discovered the last tube about to leave. Nearly two hours must have passed since I left Hamish's house. I didn't understand how that could be, where the time had gone. I sat in the tube shaking my head at the whole episode and then I pulled out the card he had given me.

There was a stylised image of a spider and web; it might also have been the steering wheel of a car. There was a telephone number.

Arachnid Cars and Tours

Individualised Guided Tours to the Coming Order

I slipped the card back in my pocket. A crank, I decided, a sick crank at that because Donald had died of a spider bite.

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The next day was one we all remembered afterwards. The day when everything changed. 13-12. The birth of a new type of terrorism. It was not just about the death and chaos that was caused but the method that had been chosen.

The story had started on a minor local site I was looking at during work. A trapped train on the Victoria Line between Finsbury Park and Seven Sisters. As the hours dragged on it was revealed that there had been no response from the driver by radio. The first of the rescue party from the Fire Service who reached the train had been unprepared. As the group entered the tube they merely flicked away the spiders. A spider got under the gauntlet of one of the fireman. The effect was rapid: muscular cramps, tachycardia, tremors and then death.

When a properly prepared crew went through the cars, spraying them with insecticide, they found a carnival of death. Later it was confirmed that a wide range of symptoms had affected the victims. Bodies were swollen with oedema, reddened. Many had vomited or had attacks of diarrhoea. In one case a woman had miscarried.

All two hundred and thirteen people, including the driver, were dead.

A video message had been left on a hosting site. A man stood before a banner painted with a slogan.

Prepare to welcome the coming New Order.

The man speaking claimed to be from something called The Brotherhood of the Spider. Police identified him as Mark Arkwell, a security guard at a shopping mall. When they showed a picture of him I felt my skin crawl, a recognition I couldn't place. Next to the slogan on the banner was a crude symbol of a spider. It was almost exactly the same as the logo of Arachnid Tours.

Much of the reporting was speculation about how the operation had been carried out, how the spiders, Black Widows, had probably been modified and bred in a lab so that the latro-toxins were more virulent and fast-acting.

There was speculation about the Brotherhood of the Spider, usually concluding that it was a fantasy and that Arkwell had acted alone; gaining access to the modified spiders through some unknown means.

I phoned the police.

Or at least I thought I did.

I had the phone held to my ear but in my other hand I held the card that I had been given in the cab the evening of Donald's funeral. When the dry familiar voice answered I put the phone down.

I tried to phone again and got through to the same familiar voice.

"Arachnid."

"What have you done to me?"

"Perhaps," the voice said, "you would like to book a personal tour. A tour of places pertinent to the coming order."

"You think I would come anywhere near you?"

"We need to carry on our conversation."

But we'd hardly really talked. What was he on about?

And yet there was that memory of sitting in the cab, and there, in turn, the vague recollection that we had been talking, had been somewhere together with others. He had done something to me that meant I couldn't remember; and now I couldn't even dial the telephone properly. I had to do something.

"Very well," I said, "when shall we meet?"

"I'm waiting just outside."

I would not get into the car but I would take the registration number. I looked out of the window. From here, on the third floor, I could see across the grassed forecourt of my block to the road. The cab was parked just out of range of a street light, in shadow. I decided I wouldn't go out there, that he was, at best, a crank and at worst an associate of a mass murderer. I found the phone again and tried to press a 9.

"There is a darkness that occludes even thought. A velvet darkness that is the only meaning of peace."

I was in the back of the cab and we were driving. I didn't know how I'd got there. I tried the door but it was locked.

"Let me out."

I recognised the corner we were turning, a little off-license with a grille mesh over the front windows covered in posters advertising Carlsberg. Then we were in a street of dark terraced houses.

"I promised you a tour," he said.

"Who are you?"

"You can call me Grey," his voice was, as ever, flat. "Now just sit back and enjoy the ride until we get to our destination."

Once again we passed through a city of darkness. There was hardly a light on in the houses and I don't recall that we saw a single living person.

We must have been stopped for a while before I realised. I felt groggy as though coming out of sleep.

"Where are we?" I asked.

He turned in the driver's seat and looked at me. His two eyes almost met above the bridge of his nose.

"Below us is the Victoria Line," he said. "We're just about where the train stopped in the tunnel."

"You're sick," I said, trying to stir myself with anger but I felt tired, hardly able to move.

"The new order is coming," he said, "all that matters is deciding how one meets it."

"Why me?" I said, the words muffling in my mouth, a horrible pleading tone to them.

"Because you're an architect."

"No," I said, "no. I studied architecture. But I just work in the town planning department now. I never made it…"

"A new order is coming. You must return to your studies. You must be prepared."

And I managed to hit the 9 key on the telephone as I stood in the living room. I looked at the phone; then returned it to its cradle. Outside the grassy area and the street were dark. There was no cab waiting.

~~~

I began to sketch for the first time in years. I drew, as I had always done, buildings. But these buildings looked more like the cover of old science-fiction paperbacks than anything from the architectural canon. There was hardly a straight line but instead great spans of ragged arches and jagged towers all strung with cables in lattices and lace like conglomerations.

On the news they said people had started to kill spiders at random, even though it was pointed out that the species involved in the attack was not native and that there had been no sightings in the wild.

I stayed off work, ringing in sick. I clipped out every report from newspapers and printed off stuff from the Internet. I stuck these reports on the noticeboard in the kitchen until this was full. I then sellotaped clippings
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on the kitchen wall. The rest of the time I spent with my sketch book, filling it with designs. I was overcome with a surge of creativity that I thought I'd long ago lost through years in the planning office. My work phoned one morning to ask how I was. Apparently I'd been off for over a week. I put on a cough and told him I could hardly get out of bed.

On the kitchen wall were auguries:

A group of parents poisoned their own children with industrial insecticide trying to rid their school of a few spiders that were nothing more than a minor domestic species. Luckily there were no fatalities.

A stampede at a nightclub in Clapham. Two people crushed to death as the crowd tried to escape after the DJ announced he'd seen a spider. It was later revealed that this was a practical joke.

In all these and other incidents the common thread was that no dangerous spiders were present. All had been the result of panic, hysteria.

Then came the attack on a major bank in Docklands, Black Widows dropping out of air-conditioning ducts; coming up through drains and plugholes. The authorities incinerated all the bodies in the name of public hygiene.

I found myself in the back of Grey's cab. I couldn't recall having telephoned him. I stared at the back of his head, at the mass of curly hair. On the rear-view mirror a spider was crawling across the reflection of his huge eyes.

"I've bought you these," I said and handed him some of the sketches I had been working on.

He held them up, examining them in the dull light from a distant lamp post outside. He looked at each picture carefully; the one I called *The Great Web* with its miles of organic cables in complex matrices high above the crowds of ecstatic worshippers below; the *Arch of Carapace* with its matte dome of living shell drawing the eye into its darkness; *The Total City* with its skyline of towers, all without straight lines, shaped like multi-jointed legs with protruding pro-lateral and multi-lateral spires.

His eyes caught mine in the mirror as I looked eagerly from the back. The spider was still there.

"Do you remember those days," he said, "when you used to dream of designing a whole city from scratch? You would talk into the night about Oscar Niemeyer and Lucio Costa working on the creation of Brasilia."

"How do you know?"

“Your friend Donald. All his knowledge is available to me.”

There were more spiders now, covering the surfaces inside the cab.

He put down the sketches and turned around. His two great eyes had deformed, so that each contained four pupils. His skin looked scabbed where it wasn’t covered with dark bristles.

“Go now,” he said.

When I stepped out of the cab I was outside my block of flats.

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Newspaper reports filled the walls of my kitchen

-Parents Groups boycott schools

-Turnpike Lane infestation

-Funeral Directors refuse spider dead

-Bin men strike in spider protest

-Covent Garden Tragedy

I tried to fathom out what had happened, even as I continued my sketching, no longer answering the phone because work kept calling. In some of the incidents the modified Black Widows were present but such incidents were far outnumbered by false alarms leading to overreaction, panics. The Covent Garden incident, for example, was a false sighting that led to a crush as people tried to escape from a lift.

Grey had some connection with Donald and for me this is where it had all begun. The death of my friend, killed by a spider in Malaysia. I rang his brother Hamish. I didn’t know how to broach the subject, expecting him to be angry, still mired in grief.

“I just wanted to know” I said, after preliminaries, “what happened to Donald.”

There was a silence. I could hear him breathing.

Then he spoke: “I’ve wanted to tell someone. I always thought there was something wrong with it all. His politics. Deep ecology. But it can’t get him into trouble now.”

He sounded relieved to be talking. I waited for him to continue.

“There was this stuff in Malaysia. But I don’t know what to make of it. There’s some emails he sent. Perhaps you should have a look at them.”

He said he would forward them all to me.
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Hamish,

Sorry not been in touch for a while. Settled in well in Georgetown. Penang is very beautiful but there is a lot of work to be done. Off to the mainland tomorrow, over the world's second longest bridge. Everyone here goes on about it but to me it is just another nail that humanity has pushed into the flesh of the planet.

Anyway, I promise I won't work too hard but will go to a bar or two.

Donald.

~~~

Hamish,

Back in Georgetown. The field trips have been interesting from a technical point of view but I couldn't help leaving with a sense of disappointment. The landscape is scarred by the workings of man: rubber plantations and dual carriageways. It wasn't the communion with the wilderness that I had hoped for.

I'm bored of drinking in the travellers' bars here. I found a place in the backstreets. If you saw it you would think it is as far from nature as you might find. It is opposite a car mechanics and next to a cheap computer shop. Like a lot of places away from the air-conditioned outposts of the West it is hot, the wet heat dripping off you, making you stink of the Deet you have to cover yourself with. This feeling, of your own body melting away, is a constant reminder that you are an outsider here.

But I've seen something intriguing. I was in the front of the bar but could see into a backroom. In there were two Chinese looking at something on a table. I assumed they were gambling. Then a couple of Malays joined them, nodding at the barman and then going into the backroom. This was unusual as Muslims in Malaysia are strictly prohibited from gambling and don't usually go in for it. I was curious I suppose but I don't think anything would have come of it until I got talking with another Englishman who came over to my table. I hadn't expected to meet one in a dive like this.

"What do you think?" he said, nodding to the back room.

"What's going on?" I asked.

“Well,” he said, and he leaned low. He had these large eyes that seemed to draw me into a conspiracy.

Trouble was I couldn’t quite catch what he said, I felt silly and didn’t want to say I hadn’t hear him, so I nodded, smiled.

“Yes,” he said finally raising his voice, “you certainly should.”

I was standing up then. A few more people came after that, both Malays and Chinese. I went towards the back room. When I looked back at the Englishman he nodded me on. I went in.

Someone waved me over to the table. As I got closer I could see that where people had crowded around, they each had a hand, palm up, on the table top. There were so many people now that some had to press into the backs of those at the front, slipping their arms between any gaps in order to be able to stretch out their hands. I was beckoned again, a small Malay with white teeth smiling and calling me over, his free hand twitching as it waved me in.

The room was badly lit and it was only as I got close to the table, managing to peep over someone’s shoulder, that I saw what was going on. There was a large spider on the table and it was crawling over the mass of hands that formed a landscape of flesh. It looked like an Australian Redback, which has been spread all over Asia by cargo ships.

Suddenly one of the men began to twitch and convulse, held upright by the press of the people around him so that he looked like he was doing a manic dance.

I thought the whole thing would be over then, that someone would call an ambulance but as they helped him lie on the floor his body in spasms they all seemed elated, smiling and clapping.

I turned and walked out. The front bar was empty. The Englishman wasn’t there.

“What’s going on?” I screamed at the barman.

He shrugged.

Somehow I managed to get back to my hotel.

All very strange.

Donald.

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Hamish had written back in a jokey tone, telling Donald he shouldn't go back to that bar and should forget all about it. Meet some nice backpacker girl….

Donald's emails after that were garbled, full of cut and pasted sections from the Internet about global warming and ecological disaster. Among all this there was a section that seemed relevant to me.

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Returned to the backstreet bar last night. Watched the ceremony again. Did I dream the rest of the evening? The corpse carried through the street with great honour. The whole city worshipping him.

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There was a long gap between this and the last email, which was dated just before Donald's death.

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Hamish,

I have been attracted to the ideas of the deep ecologists for a while now. I know we've argued about this often, I know we agreed to drop the subject but bear with me. The solution to Earth's problems needs to be quick and radical. The ideas that the Earth should return to its natural state, that humanity is an infestation, that is killing the planet has become so patently obvious and true to me that I looked for evidence that nature was fighting back against us. Could outbreaks of various types of flu, or Ebola or AIDs be the Earth's weapon to save itself?

Last night I went back again, back to my little backstreet bar with its crowd of Chinese and Malays around the table. I thought I might place my hand on the table as they do. I approached and they parted to let me get nearer. In the feeble light I watched the spider, the darkness of its carapace, its perfect ovoid abdomen with its bright red stripe. I watched it move the central joins of its legs as it walked across the men's fingers, their palms. I came closer, beginning to reach out to place my hand there but then I saw the most astounding thing.
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There was no spider.

There was no spider there at all.

Although every eye was on the same spot, focusing on where I thought I had seen it, there wasn't anything there. Everyone watched an absence. Everyone saw as a man winced and fell in response to a bite of something that did not exist.

As the table cleared and they crowded around the man on the floor I saw the table properly, without the hands. There was a scattered pack of cards and a few bottles of Tiger beer there.

I backed away, seeing the people smiling at one another, helping the man back to his feet.

Perhaps it is a lack of sleep or the heat. The sweat and the Deet stink on me. I must have imagined it all. A trick of shadow.

I've had a drink now, in the hotel bar. It all seems silly but I'll go back tomorrow night. I won't let it all be a trick. I'll tell them that the spider can be our salvation.

Donald.

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There were no more emails after that. A few days after Donald had been found dead.

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The next time I sat in Grey's cab, his transformation was almost complete. He was turned towards me, his front two legs resting on the head rest of the driver's seat and his head projecting above this, his row of eight eyes staring at me. His other legs were variously placed around the inside of the car, two resting on the steering wheel, two working the pedals; the remaining two were pressed against the vinyl of the car ceiling. There were other spiders scattered around the cab.

I passed him over some more of my sketches. My vision of the city had reached a stage where I dreamed of inhabiting boulevards so wide their sides were on the horizon. Above would be the great lattices that formed the web that enveloped a transformed London.

“Very good,” Grey said, and then began to chew away at the sketches, grinding them into a pulp, flooding the mash of paper with a coating of enzymes and sucking the resulting liquid into his guts.

“You are doing well,” he said at last, his palps wagging. “Remember that a spider can only digest liquids. Only take in the essence, the nourishment. All the rest is husk, which must be discarded.”

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I spent the next weeks sketching and finishing my portfolio of the city to come. The television news played in the background: the increasing death toll; the flight from the cities by anyone who had the means; the dead lying on the streets.

None of it mattered because my vision was complete now. The city would be a vast network of webbing, a structure so intricate it passed the point where it was something inanimate and became capable of generating thought and meaning. I lay on my sofa surrounded by my plans. The television now showed only the deep blue of a lack of signal. The broadcasts had ended.

When I saw Grey he was a perfectly normal man again. I walked over to his cab with its symbol, Arachnid Tours. We drove through daylight streets scattered with bodies and the discarded suitcases and holdalls of refugees. The dead had begun to change shape, odd limbs and feelers sprouting from stomachs like weeds growing from pavement cracks.

“You remember now,” he said.

It was not a question but a command.

“You remember that first time together.”

I could see myself sat in the back of his cab in that darkened street on the evening after Donald’s funeral. We had been somewhere, a hall. The mundane trappings of some community centre--children’s drawings, and an equal opportunities poster--were all obscured by dense webbing strung at the edges of my perception. We had stood in the shadow, a crowd of us. We had listened to the Creature on the podium. We were in a web, waiting to be devoured. Each of us being eaten by the failures of our lives.

In the dark eyes of the future, in the light of its penetration we could see the potential for our rebirth.
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Grey had led me out from the hall with another man and we had climbed into the cab. The other man was Mark Arkwell, who would soon become the tube terrorist. He was wearing his security guard's uniform. Grey spoke to us, telling us how we both had important roles to play in what was to come.

"It's all set for the train," Arkwell said.

"Good," said Grey.

Then there were words coming directly into my head.

Each strand of my web is a life. I am weaving the most complex of structures, across the city, across the world, until one day it will all be mine. A dark will descend from the intricacies of the web, so that it becomes solid, an egg of the future, hatching the light to come.

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"Then," I said now, as we drove in daylight, "is there a spider or not?"

"Oh there are spiders," he said, "But symbols are more powerful than spiders and the most powerful symbols are in the mind."

We drove on. The day was bright. I don't think I have ever known London so light, as though the instant of an atomic explosion were frozen, filling the sky and bleaching the skin of every building. It was hard to distinguish one form from another because everything had become a unity in the light; shadows become milky ghosts, the walls pierced with x-rays. Darkness had been reborn white. Soon I would begin to build the city I had always dreamed of. The new order had come.
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THE PARLOR DOWNSTAIRS

Stanley B. Webb

The dead house glowed blue in the light of the moon. It had been abandoned in the middle of construction and its bare OSB board walls were rotting with mold. The window frames were empty and the doorway would never close. The house was overgrown with blackberry briers.

Twelve year old Tim was on his way home after a play-date with his friend, Bill. Bill said the old house was haunted, but Tim knew better. His father had taught him that ghosts only lived in the imagination. There was nothing to fear in the night, unless one of the vicious dogs that howled on the next road escaped its chain.

Regardless of knowing better, Tim became afraid. He was certain that something was in the old house, something hungry, watching him through the empty windows. He reasoned with his fear as his father had taught him to do, but his reason failed in the lonely night. His knees quivered and he stopped, fascinated as a bird is said to be fascinated by a hunting snake.

A horrible scream sounded behind him. Tim cried out in shock, even though he recognized the voice. He turned, saw an onrushing skull, jumped aside and fell into the roadside briars. The skull passed by with a laugh and a clatter. It was only a Halloween toy, attached to the headlamp of a bicycle.

The rider, who wore an ape-like monster mask, leaped from the saddle and rushed at Tim. The bicycle fell with a crash and the headlamp went out. The rider raised his arms and roared.

Tim stood up. “I know it’s you, Barry.

Barry stopped roaring and lowered his arms. He was big for his fifteen years. He had been held back in school three times so he was in Tim’s home-room class.

“You think you’re brave,” said Barry, his voice muffled by the mask.

“I’m not afraid of *you*.”

Barry considered a long time before he spoke.

“Do you want to see something?”

“No,” said Tim.

“You’ll have to be brave, because it’s in there.”

Barry pointed at the house.

With the bully’s appearance, Tim had forgotten the Thing. A glance at the old house renewed his fear. He took a quick step, intending to circle Barry and run home.

Barry lunged and caught him by the arm.

“It’ll only take five minutes.”

He began to drag Tim off the road, toward the house.

Tim bit Barry’s hand. Barry yelled and let go. Tim sprinted for home. He stumbled over the bicycle and glass crunched underfoot. He regained his balance and ran on. He heard Barry coming after him, but the larger boy panted and stopped.

“Sissy!” Barry yelled. “Come back, little girl!”

Tim ran until he heard nothing but the wind in his ears. His house was around the next bend and he ran into the safety of his yard’s mercury vapor light.

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Tim’s bedroom window was open to the warm night. The last thing that he saw before he fell asleep was moonlight on the ceramic dinosaurs which stalked his shelves.

When he awoke, the moon was gone, and his dinosaurs were too dark to see. The dogs on the next road barked in panic. One dog screamed, then all went silent.

Tim knew that the Thing had come out to hunt.

He groped his way across the room and locked his window.

~~~

The next day, Barry cornered him in the school lavatory.

“You broke my bike light last night.”

“I’m sorry,” said Tim.

“You owe me twenty-five bucks.”

“All I have is lunch money.”

“You’ll have to pay me somehow.”

Barry pushed him toward a toilet stall. Two other boys entered the lavatory. Barry let go.

Tim escaped to his next class.

~~~

Tim approached his father after school.

"Can I have twenty-five dollars?"

"What do you need it for?"

"I need a bike light."

"Our pole light illuminates the entire yard."

"It doesn't illuminate the road."

"You're not allowed to ride on the road."

"But someday I will be."

Tim's father considered for a time. "I'll pay you for your chores, one dollar per week. By the end of the summer, you'll be able to buy a fine headlamp."

Tim's heart seemed to shrivel. He forced himself to smile.

"Thanks, Dad. Can I go to Bill's?"

"You *may* go to Bill's."

~~~

They explored Bill's storage barn. This seemed like a treasure house to Tim, but Bill was restless. He caught a fly from the windowpane, pulled off its wings and dropped it into one of the barn's countless funnel webs. The spider rushed out and dragged the fly into its hole, to bind it in webbing.

Bill sighed and kicked a dusty old bicycle.

"This is boring. Let's explore the haunted house."

Tim felt gooseflesh.

"There's nothing there; they didn't even finish the place."

"It would be cool, anyway."

"It's probably not safe in there."

Bill grinned. "You're afraid, aren't you?"

"No!"

"You're afraid of ghosts."

"No, I'm not."

“Then, prove it. I dare you to go into that old house.”

Tim face heated. “I don’t take dares.”

Bill laughed at him. “You’re always bragging about how brave you are, but you’re afraid of ghosts.”

“No, I’m not. I’m going home.”

“You baby!”

Tim stormed to the barn door, just as Barry rode his bicycle along the road. Tim and Bill hid in the barn’s shadows until Barry was gone.

Then Tim had an idea.

“Does the light on your old bike still work?”

Bill shrugged. “I guess so.”

“Can I have it?”

“Let’s make a deal. I’ll trade for your T-Rex.”

“No way! How about the Triceratops?”

After much bickering, Tim traded away his favorite dinosaur. He started for home with the headlamp in his hand, after promising to deliver the T-Rex the next day.

Tim was on the look-out for Barry, but the bully ambushed him from the woods opposite to the old house. Barry aimed a B.B. pistol at him.

“If you run, I’ll shoot you.”

Tim held out the headlamp.

“I got you a new light.”

Barry expression was bemused for a moment, but then turned hard again.

“That ain’t new.”

He struck the light from Tim’s hand.

“Hey!”

Barry gestured at the old house.

“Go in there.”

“No.”

Barry shot him in the thigh.

Tim felt as if a steel fist had punched him and driven a hot needle into his leg. He grabbed his thigh, fell down and screamed.

Barry dragged him through the briars, toward the old house. The thorns ripped through Tim’s clothes. He screamed again in pain, but his eyes were on the doorway. The threshold was two feet above ground level.

Barry grunted as he hoisted Tim and pushed him inside, then grunted again as he hoisted himself.

Tim had never been inside the old house before. The light was green, due to the surrounding briars. The floor was plywood, covered with dust, and strange marks. The roof frames and wall studs were exposed. A cellar hole gaped in the rear corner.

Tim knew that the Thing was down there.

Barry was not an intelligent boy, but he had a predator's cunning. He saw what Tim feared and dragged him to it. Tim fought and screamed until Barry threw him down the hole. He bounced on the wooden stairs, then landed on a yielding surface.

The Thing seized him.

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Barry tingled all over at Tim's long, final scream. He had been a bully since kindergarten, but nothing he had ever done had caused a scream of such compelling anguish. Tim's cry muffled and then choked to silence.

He realized that something else was below him.

"Tim?"

A brief, soft shuffling came from the cellar.

"Tim?"

There was no further sound.

Barry waited a long time before he stepped down to the first riser. He paused again before his next step. He descended half of the stairs at that pace, then stopped in visceral fear.

The cellar had seemed pitch-dark from above, but a diffuse grey light entered through the high slot windows. As his eyes adjusted, Barry saw that the entire cellar was draped with something like a huge, wooly blanket. The nearer part of the blanket rolled onto itself and funneled behind the stairs. He leaned aside and looked into the funnel.

A spider as large as himself looked back. It held a wiggling mummy in its pedipalps.

Barry stared into the spider's eight eyes for a long moment, then he laughed.

The spider tensed. It dragged the mummy back into its funnel.
~~~

Barry went upstairs, left the old house and wandered along the road. He still laughed. Eventually, a police cruiser stopped and took him to the hospital.

Barry never spoke again, but he always laughed.

Tim's father filed a missing person report. The search extended to the neighboring states, but Tim's remains were never found.

HUNTER AND HUNTED

Kevin Holton

“Don’t kill it!” Lucy yelled, knocking me aside. I’d had my foot raised, poised to slam down on a little eight-legged bastard when she intervened. She slid a paper under it and carried it to the window where brushed it off outside. I rolled my eyes.

“You know, as much as you love nature, your sunshine and rainbows won’t stop one of them from biting you. What are you gonna do when you’ve got spider venom filling your veins because you just had to save them all?” Maybe that was harsh, but I was tired of her hippy ways. Sure, she wasn’t screaming “Fur is murder!” and throwing red paint on anything that looked like leather, but still, what did it matter if I squished a bug or two?

Scoffing, she crossed her arms over her chest, pressing her breasts toward her face. Her ample bosom did, in some cases, make up for how annoying she could be. “It’s not my fault you’re afraid of spiders.”

“I’m not afraid,” I snapped back, “I just don’t like things that could kill me in one bite. They’re too small, they shouldn’t be that poisonous.”

“Not all spiders are poisonous.”

“Could you two get back to work?” Damien snapped. He was our boss; we worked for a real estate company, a tiny firm that operated out of the second floor of a strip mall-type office building.

“Sure thing,” I said, returning to my work, though my eyes lingered as Lucy uncrossed her arms, resulting in a hefty bounce. Shaking my head, I returned to assessing local listings, cross referencing prices by square feet, distance from schools, local property tax and all the other crap that first-time home owners go bananas over.

It was mind-numbing work, but it was all I could find after getting an MBA in marketing, so there I was at some nameless firm, working with the busty hippy and a boss who was always up my ass, returning each night to my dog, Steve. He was a gift from my last girlfriend and the only memento that I kept around. I mean, you can’t just ditch an animal, even if you want to. It’s not right, leaving a dog in a pound.

There was a tickling on my right hand. I glanced down—a spider was crawling across it, a big, fat, brown, nasty looking thing. I jerked my hand and sent it flying. It landed on the far side of my desk and I slammed my fist down on it, squashing that asshole right back to hell.

"No!" Lucy squealed, jumping up. "What did you do? Mike, why are you so mean?"

"I didn't want to get bitten!"

"It wasn't gonna bite you, it was just minding its own business and you murdered it."

Okay, maybe she was a "Fur is murder!" type.

The boss's door slammed open. "What are you two doing?" He pierced us with his sharp gaze, like he'd drawn a sword and run us both through.

"Mike killed a spider!"

"Fucker was gonna bite me!"

Damien glared, "Mike, language. We've talked about this."

"Why is Mike so mean?"

Rolling his eyes, the boss grumbled, "Look, business is slow and we're ahead of schedule. You two obviously aren't focusing so just go home. Get all this energy out of your system. I don't care how—go run a marathon, go to a concert, punch something, whatever, be back nine AM tomorrow. I'm not havin' this," he said, gesturing to them both.

"Oh no," Lucy said. "We made you mad. I'm sorry, Damien!"

"Do we get paid for the forced leave?" I added.

She swatted me. "Apologize to him! And to the spider!"

"Both of you, just go. I don't need apologies. I need you to do the job I'm paying you for. You don't do it, you don't get paid."

I grunted in acknowledgment and grabbed my briefcase, not noticing the empty hallways as I made my way out into the Miami heat. The sun beat down like it wanted to sear a big black hole in the ground right where I was standing and in the sixty seconds it took to get to and start up my Subaru, my collar had dampened with sweat. I lowered the windows to let the heat out, then rolled them back up as the air kicked on, letting it blast over me and cool off the interior. Nothing sucks more than grabbing a 110 degree steering wheel.

Across the lot, Lucy speed walked to her car, a white Sedan without a speck of dirt on it. I always thought white cars were dumb ideas because

they showed every detail of the wear and tear you put ‘em through, but I guessed she didn’t drive much.

Shrugging, I put the car in gear and pulled out, heading for home. Sure, I was out a few hours’ pay, but I got an extra few hours drinking as the trade-off. I swung by the liquor store for a twenty-four pack (not that I’d drink all of them, but I was gonna need more than six), hit up the pet store for Steve and returned to my quiet home, where there were neither spiders nor hippies to bother me.

~~~

Lucy ran her hand along my chest. I couldn’t see her. Maybe my eyes were shut and I was just enjoying the moment, or maybe I’d drunk a few too many. Maybe the room was just dark. I could hear her cooing in my ear, something like, “You look so yummy, Mike. So… Mmm… I could just take a bite out of you.”

Grinning like a child stealing his first candy bar, I said, “Oh, you’d like that, huh?”

A tongue traced its way along my neck, up my jaw, tickling my ear. “I would,” she whispered. “I would love that.”

I felt a thump between my shoulder and neck, a little like a bite and a little like something hard hitting me. Next time, I swore not to drink so much before boning down with Lucy From The Office.

“You know how sexy you are?” she cooed, hands running along my arms. “Dead sexy.”

“Dead, huh?” It was the best my inebriated mind could come up with.

She giggled. “Sex and death aren’t so different. Emotions run high, pheromones get released, your heart stars pounding, adrenaline kicks up, and at the end, someone is always very, very… satisfied.” More hands trailed along my chest.

Then I realized she had too many hands. I opened my eyes. Lucy’s face sat atop a spider’s body, her eight hairy arms topped with human hands, each groping me. They latched on, holding me in place as Lucy bared her fangs and lunged for my throat.

“Ah fuck!” I yelled, flailing and rolling off the couch onto a few beer bottles. I can’t tell how many because they shattered beneath me. In pain and still freaked by my dream, I rolled around in the glass, cutting my chest,
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back, and arms as I scrambled away. Steve came up, barked once and rolled onto his back, waiting for me to rub his belly.

Groaning, I said, “Give me a sec, boy,” and stumbled to the bathroom, examining my wounds. Some of them were bleeding badly and going to need stitches. I threw Steve a bone to entertain him while I was gone and made my way to my car, then through the always-crowded streets of Miami to South Miami Hospital. The flashing lights, neon palm trees and half naked strangers were able to keep my mind off the pain radiating through my torso long enough for me to make it to the ER without much of a problem.

I parked the car, held my head high and strode in, doing my best to pretend it didn’t hurt. The nurse working the front desk—a stone-faced, middle-aged black woman–took a look at me and said, “You lose a fight with a gator?”

“Never. I’m running five and oh on those scaly bastards. I did fall through a coffee table though.” Beer, coffee table, whatever. I didn’t want them to think I was some drunk idiot.

“Right. Fill these out,” she said, passing me some forms. “Doctors will be with you shortly.”

In Florida, normal ER patients range from car crash survivors to skateboarding kids who dislocated their nut sacks on a handrail to people who actually do lose fights against alligators. *What the fuck ever*, *as long as I’m in and out quick*.

Tonight, the hospital was mercifully low on other patients, so a male nurse took me to be seen about ten minutes after I got there. We went through the usual hospital routine of making small talk (which I knew was really to see if I was drunk or had brain damage) while I took off my clothes and let him inspect me. I was hoping the nurse would be female (what man doesn’t?) but he told me that I’d only need a couple stitches, once we got the glass out of the wounds.

Half an excruciating hour later, I had filled an entire urine sample jar with shards of blood-stained glass. It was like someone smashed a church window. Then the doctor came to sew me back together, asking all the while, “Does it hurt? You doin’ okay, Mike?”

Yeah buddy, you’re ramming a sharp piece of metal through me and dragging my skin closed. No shit it hurts.

I kept my comments to myself though. The poor bastards got enough hassle from Medicare patients without my adding on. Luckily, that part was quick. Soon enough, I was putting on my torn-up shirt and thanking him for the near hour's worth of probing, prodding and pricking that would probably show up as a ten thousand dollar charge in my mail sometime next week.

"Oh, and, Mike?" the doctor said. Doctor Hessel. A beady-eyed little rat with giant ears.

"Yeah?" I turned back.

"While I don't view it my place to judge what a person does with his or her partners, try to tone it down next time. I wouldn't want to see you here again," he said, winking and chuckling as he left.

The fuck does that mean? I wanted to yell the question, chase him down and get an answer out of him, but hospitals are weird about security. Guards everywhere, more for the drugs than for the patients. Breaking into a hospital and beating a sick guy up would be bad, but stealing a jar of morphine? Unforgivable.

I spent the whole drive home asking that question. As soon as I got into my house, I made my way to the bathroom, gingerly taking off my shirt to make sure the stitches didn't pull.

The wound hadn't been visible when I had it on before, but now that I was bare-chested, I could see a bite mark on my left trapezius. Something with a good sized mouth and big fangs. My mind flashed back to my dream, but that was ridiculous. I did, however, have a dog.

"Steve!" I yelled, wondering if I'd catch red on his teeth. "Where are ya, boy?"

It was unusual for him to not greet me at the door, but not if he'd done something wrong, like the time he shit on my pillow while I was at work. I didn't see the guy for hours. Then he was all barks and tail wags, like nothing happened.

Walking into my living room, I saw him curled up in his bed in the corner, a lump of darkness in a room only slightly lit by moonlight. Flicking on the light, I said, "Steve…"

Steve wasn't moving. But, there were dozens, if not hundreds, of spiders crawling over him. They'd tied him down with webbing and sucked the life out of him. His fur had fallen in clumps from his emaciated corpse. The carnivorous spiders were scuttling along the walls, the ceiling, the

floor, my coffee table—they were dragging away the blood stained pieces of glass I'd left behind. I didn't want to think about what they wanted with them.

My stomach lurched and before I could think about rushing to the bathroom, I hurled a mix of bile and cheap booze onto the floor. There, squirming in my sick, were more spiders. Mixed into the stuff were egg sacs, some twitching; ready to open.

"What the fuck?" I groaned, letting out another wet heave of spider-infested stomach acid. "What the unholy fuck?"

The sight of them made my skin itch. Badly. Then, looking down, I saw the wounds in my chest and arms spasming. I cried out as spiders wormed along under my skin and out through the cuts, scurrying along my body.

I squished as many as I could, but for each I killed, another two seemed to take its place. It was a really disgusting, insectoid Hydra. It was a swarm and I was the hive. Tiny mandibles began pinching at me and I screamed as they ripped away strips of flesh.

I heard a soft laugh behind me. Spinning, I saw Lucy there, still in the same outfit from yesterday—a camisole and skirt. Her skin twisted and jumped as she walked closer.

"I told you," she growled, two long, hair arms ripping their way out of her upper back, "that some spiders," her human arms shed their skin, "are not," her legs become spider-like and two more burst out from near her hips, "poisonous."

Her body shifted, her lower body ballooning as two more arms pushed out of her chest, just below her collar bones. Lucy's jaw shifted to a huge, crunching set of pedipalp. I dimly recognized her shape as a Huntsman Spider. Well, a Huntswoman Spider.

The two front legs, prickly and brown and topped with human hands, grabbed my collar, dragging me toward her hungry maw.

JUROGUMO

Kerry E.B. Black

He tipped his glass to her and she coyly lowered her almond eyes, blushing as she accepted the chocolate martini. He confidently moved to the bar stool beside her. Her exotic beauty enticed many glances, so he wanted to establish possession with body language and proximity.

She was slight built, doll-like. He admired the way the clothes clung to her athletic curves as she reminisced about Japan. A song played, causing a moue on her small red lips. "Are the singers in pain or angry?" she wondered.

"Both, maybe. I don't know." He smiled slyly, "but we could go someplace with music that you might like better."

He congratulated himself when she offered to play for him on her lute. Her apartment was not far. Though he had no idea what a lute was, this privacy was better then he'd hoped. He watched her tight behind sway enticingly as she proceeded, anticipating the feel of her tiny waist.

He never asked her name. She offered it anyway, an enticement and a warning. "Jurogumo." He did not speak Japanese and she did not translate, just smiled sweetly. Her own anticipation, that of the "whore spider," was eating her willing fly.

WATCHER

Rich Dodgin

I was in the en-suite breathing a sigh of relief at the negative pregnancy test result when it appeared. A sudden flickering semi presence of black reflected in the mirror behind my worry worn face.

Despite everything I'd seen and heard on TV over the previous few weeks I screamed and shut my eyes, dropping the test results and clutching the sink for support.

'Matt!'

I heard the bathroom door open behind me. 'Oh shit, that's it then, Lucy. You're going to have a baby,' he said in a desolate voice, 'My life is officially over.'

I gritted my teeth. Well, at least that cleared up how he really felt about "us" getting pregnant. 'No, you bastard! Up in the corner!'

'What?' And then I heard him gasp. 'Holy shit. A Watcher.'

So I hadn't imagined it. Damn.

'I'm out of here,' said Matt.

'What?' I opened my eyes and spun round; making a concerted effort not to look at the black hairy mass of legs huddled in the corner of my vision. 'You're not going to leave me now, are you?'

He nodded. 'I'm not staying here with that thing. I'll call you.'

I followed him into the bedroom where he started putting his things into his rucksack, feeling my anger rising. 'You wanker.'

He wouldn't look at me as he packed, stuffing his odds and ends into his bag. He finally met my gaze and I saw the fear in his eyes. 'Those things freak me out, he said. 'I can't stay.' Then his eyes opened wider in shock and he nodded towards me. 'It's behind you now. Jesus.'

I turned and, sure enough, the Watcher was now crouched above the bathroom door, the cluster of red compound eyes all trained on me.

'I'll be in touch,' said Matt, all but running out the room.

'Wait,' I managed, following him into the hallway, but he didn't look back. He left the apartment without a word, slamming the front door behind him.

Fuck. I turned to go back to the bedroom, only to see that my unwelcome house guest was now sitting above the television. I felt a wave of revulsion sweep over me and decided I'd better call work.

The first reports of Watchers had appeared a few weeks earlier, coming in from all across the globe. These spider-like creatures would materialise near a person and from that point on would stay with them, monitoring from a distance of no more than ten feet. So far there was no obvious rhyme or reason behind who they appeared to and all they seemed to do was watch - hence the name they'd been given: Watchers.

They weren't solid, they had an almost holographic like appearance. Looking at them for too long hurt the eyes and induced headaches, primarily because their angles were all "wrong" and didn't follow the accepted laws of mathematics. They gave off a sense of ancient intelligence. And they looked like giant fucking spiders.

At first people were in a panic at the arrival of these unearthly intruders, but over the next few weeks as more and more appeared and as it became accepted that they did nothing but observe, people calmed down.

The numbers of Watchers increased on a daily basis and before long we even saw them where I lived. Like everyone else I stopped and stared as an unfortunate elderly man walked down the high street with his own Watcher in tow.

Gradually most people became relatively accustomed, if not actually comfortable, with seeing the odd Watcher on TV or with others in the community. However, there were a number of individuals who just freaked out every time they saw a Watcher. Those with arachnophobia were especially affected, as were many young children who had nightmares and couldn't sleep without medication.

There were a number of theories that tried to explain what the arrival of these creatures meant. Some scientists claimed they must come from another dimension (which was why they were holographic and insubstantial in nature) and that they'd come to observe us from a purely scientific standpoint. Others said they were here to watch and judge us, and would then wipe out mankind when they saw the horrors we inflicted on each other and on the world in general.

After I'd called work and told them I wasn't feeling well enough to come in (I wasn't quite ready yet to tell them I had my very own Watcher) I dug out the twelve page booklet that told us what to do.

It was full of the usual patronising crap, telling me not to panic and reassuring me that having a man-sized eight-legged entity in my home was nothing to be unduly concerned about. There was a phone number to call and I dialled it with shaking hands, trying to calm the rising feelings of horror and repulsion as I waited for it to be answered.

I finally got through after twenty minutes and a woman took my details before informing me someone would visit me shortly. I spent the next couple of hours sitting on the sofa, trying to read a book while ignoring the spider-like monstrosity watching over me. I failed miserably on both counts.

I was so on edge that when the door buzzer went I nearly jumped through the ceiling. I flung the front door open with a sense of relief and a feeling that the cavalry had arrived.

There were three suit wearing officials. 'Miss Niven?' asked the woman, a stern looking individual with dark hair in an aggressive bob.

'Yes.'

'We're here about your Watcher. Can we come in?'

'Thank god. Yes. Please do.'

The two men walked straight up to the Watcher and proceeded to take an assortment of photographs and measurements using various pieces of strange looking equipment they pulled out of their briefcases.

While they were doing that the woman sat on the sofa next to me, introduced herself as Ms Thompson and asked me a set of questions.

'Had I noticed how the Watcher had appeared?' - No.

'What had it been doing since it appeared?' - Watching me.

'Did it follow me from room to room?' - Yes.

'How did it get from room to room?' - It just materialised.

'Had it done anything other than watch?' - No. Oh god, was it likely to?

'We don't believe so. Current reports suggest they just watch, but we have to ask in case the situation changes.' - Oh god.

She finished asking her questions and her two colleagues were done with whatever it was they were doing.

‘That’s it,’ Ms Thompson advised, ‘Just try carry on with your life as you normally would.'

'With this thing watching over me?'

'Yes. Easier said than done I suppose,’ she said, eyeing the large arachnid-like creature in the corner, ‘Anyway; here's our card. Call us if things change otherwise we'll be in touch again in a few weeks to arrange a status check.'

And that was it. I was left sitting there with my Watcher, watching and seemingly indifferent and unaffected by my visitors or how I was feeling.

I couldn't stand the thought of leaving the apartment and being seen in public with the Watcher, but sitting there and having it study me was incredibly disturbing and claustrophobic.

So in the end I took a deep breath and went outside to grab a sandwich from my local deli. It was not a pleasant experience.

As I’d expected, my Watcher followed me - seeming to 'hover' at a height of about six feet, and at a distance of about six feet behind me.

Everyone gawped as I passed.

'Look!'

'Oh my god.'

'Mummy - a monster!'

The woman behind the counter in the sandwich shop was clearly not happy about serving me with my 'companion' in tow, but I was out of there in a couple of minutes.

I scurried home. My head down and my cheeks burning red, I tried to ignore the stares and comments as I passed people.

I was already starting to get a sense of how this was going to change my life.

Trying to eat the sandwich with it watching me made me feel sick so in the end I held one of Matt’s computer magazines up in front of my face. I spent the next couple of hours like that, using the magazine as a visual shield while trying to immerse myself in the articles. Even so, the continual presence of the other worldly intruder was gnawing away at me and at some point that afternoon I lost it.

'Leave me alone, you fucker!' I snapped, hurling the magazine at it as it sat hunched in the corner above the TV, its red eyes staring. The magazine sailed through its semi-solid form, hit the wall beyond it and landed on the floor behind the TV set. The thing didn't so much as flinch and there was no acknowledgement that I'd reacted to it being there.

'Go away!' I screamed, before collapsing into a sobbing mess on the sofa.

Matt called later that day, to see how I was doing.

'How the hell do you think?' I asked angrily. 'And thank you for your support this morning,' I added sarcastically.

He didn't rise to the bait like he normally would and instead said simply, 'I've been thinking and I think we shouldn't see each other for a while.'

'What?'

'I'm sorry, Lucy. I don't mind chatting on the phone but I'll be honest, I'm not going to see you as long as you've got that thing with you. I'm sure you can understand.'

'Well fuck you then!' I screamed and hung up.

He tried calling back a few times but I just let the phone ring. He soon gave up and sent me a text that said simply 'Keep in touch.' I deleted it.

'I hope you're happy.' I said to the dark mass in the corner.

I spent the night tossing and turning. My subconscious fear was that if I switched the light off, or fell asleep, the monster in the room with me would attack. Logically, I knew it was nonsense but I simply couldn't relax and let my guard down.

In the morning, despite feeling like the walking dead from my lack of sleep, I decided I'd brave going to work. Being stuck in the apartment with it was driving me crazy.

The other commuters at the bus stop glared at me when I arrived with my Watcher. Most of them moved away from me and one woman made the sign of the cross, tutting as she did so.

When the bus eventually turned up, the driver refused to let me on, 'Sorry, love,' he said, 'Not with that thing.'

I felt my face redden as the occupants of the bus stared at me and my Watcher and as the others pushed past to get on the bus.

It took several attempts but I eventually managed to flag down a taxi. 'Thanks,' I said to the cheery Indian cabbie as I climbed in, 'I didn't think anyone was going to stop.'

'S'alright,' he said, 'my brother has one of those things.'

Thankfully the Watcher had made itself comfortable outside the back of the taxi. I'd been terrified that it might appear on the back seat next to me. That would have been way to close for comfort.

The presence of the Watcher sitting on the back of the cab almost caused a few collisions as other drivers spotted it, but we got there in one piece and I was only ten minutes late when we pulled outside my office.

'Thanks,' I told the driver as I took a note of his number in case I needed him for the journey home. From my earlier experience with the bus I had a feeling I would.

But if I'd thought things hadn't gone well so far, they were about to get a whole lot worse.

I was logging onto my pc, trying to ignore the whispering from the others in the open plan office. My Watcher had settled in a spot by the window near the corridor. People walking past had to duck as they did so and most practically ran as they passed below it. That was when my boss Peter, a greasy slime-ball at the best of times, appeared next to me.

'Can I have a word, Lucy? My office.' He walked off without checking I was following.

I sighed and headed after him. Inside his office I closed the door and then sat in the chair opposite his desk.

'Bloody hell, is that thing going to follow you everywhere?' he asked, looking like he was going to be sick.

I looked up to see that the Watcher was in the room with us, above the door, watching.

'Yep.'

He shook his head. 'I think it best if you take some time off, Lucy.'

'What?'

'Having that thing with you is going to cause problems. Stay at home for now. We'll count it as sick leave.'

The next few weeks were an absolute nightmare. I found myself stuck inside at home. Going outside and dealing with all the stares and whispers, not to mention the abuse, was something I couldn't face. I ordered all my food and shopping online and had it delivered to the flat.
I found myself getting lonely. Matt gave up trying to contact me. My Dad came round but was so freaked out that I thought he'd have a heart attack. I didn't ask him back and instead kept in contact with him via phone calls. I didn't miss my shitty job, but I missed the people.
I read a lot and I watched a lot TV.

Watchers were becoming more and more commonplace. According to the official stats, 1 in 10 people in the UK now had a Watcher. And still no theory or explanation of where they had come from, what they were and what they were doing had been proven.

Government scientists had tried just about everything to evoke a reaction from the Watchers. They'd tried tests sound-waves; heat, cold, radio waves, x-rays, micro-waves and none had any effect.

The common perception was that they were exactly as they had been named: Watchers. Watching us, mankind. For what purpose no one knew. Maybe they were scientists from another dimension, observing us for purely intellectual purposes. Maybe there was a more sinister motive. Some talked about a forthcoming invasion and started stock piling food and supplies. Others decided to get away from any nearness to these otherworldly things and moved out of the cities.

It took the best part of a couple of months, but I gradually started to get used to the presence of my continual companion.

Admittedly I was still sleeping with the light on, but I was no longer spending all of my time freaked out. Sometimes I could even go an hour so without remembering, noticing, or thinking about William. Yes, William. Giving it / him / her a name helped make it all a great deal less horrifying.

I found myself talking to William directly, which also helped...

'Morning, William, still here?'

'The blue dress or the red one, William? Actually, do you even see the same light spectrum? Do you even know what I mean by blue and red?'

'Why don't you just fuck off, William, eh?'

He never answered of course.

I tended to be more abusive towards William when I was drunk. Which, if I'm being honest, tended to be most evenings as I had little else to do.

I went through a short phase of doing things to mess with him. If he was taking notes or making observations about me and mankind in general, then I was going to do my best to throw complete curveballs and screw up the data.

And so, I sat on the sofa with my head down towards the floor and my feet up in the air. I ate cold beans off the surface of the coffee table. I sat and listened to French radio.

Hopefully this confused William, but then again maybe it just confirmed to him that human minds were weak and that I was going stir crazy.

In the end I started going out because I knew I'd clearly reached the point where I was starting go ever so slightly mad. I came to the conclusion that my sanity was more important than what people thought of me.

By now Watchers were fairly commonplace. That didn't mean they were widely accepted, however, and it wasn't unusual for those with Watchers to be shunned, receive abuse, or in extreme cases be attacked. There was even talk of new laws being introduced to restrict the rights of those with Watchers to protect the majority without them.

So it wasn't easy. Most of my friends didn't want to see me and didn't even want to speak to me in case that contaminated them in some way.

Word had obviously spread that I had a Watcher. My calls and messages went mainly ignored. Only a couple even had the decency to be honest with me and say that they were very sorry but they didn't want to see me when I had a Watcher.

Amazing how many people you think of as friends turn out to be nothing of the sort when push comes to shove.

Only one friend, Julie, from my school days, was willing to meet and to go out in public with me and William. We met in a wine bar in the centre of town. Seeing William freaked her out for the first few minutes but then she seemed to get over it and we had a couple of drinks and chatted. We mainly talked about me and my life now that I had a Watcher, but we also talked about the old days and for a while things almost felt normal again.

Unfortunately, the presence of William was too much for some people. Some of the other clientele were less than comfortable about it and in the end we had to leave the bar because of a load of abuse from a group of drunken blokes on a works night out.

We both staggered out of the bar with the shouts and jeers ringing in our ears and with tears in our eyes. Julie announced she was going home. 'I'll keep in touch, though,' she said, 'and we'll do this again sometime soon.' I played along and told her that would be lovely. Deep down I knew I wouldn't hear from her again.

My relationship with Matt was well and truly over. He'd given up trying to contact me and I found I had no desire to see him again. He'd shown his true colours on the morning William had arrived and I hadn't liked what I'd seen.

I was very lonely. So I tried an internet dating site.
I hadn't mentioned I had a Watcher in my dating profile. Most of my dates turned up, saw me and William and promptly turned and fled. A few did stay and were able to remain civil during the date. But none of them contacted me again.

It was upsetting and emotionally draining. So I took a chance and updated my profile to mention that I had a Watcher. The number of people getting in touch plummeted but a few did get in touch and agreed to meet up.

Those evenings out were actually worse than the dates with those who were freaked out. These were guys who were not interested in me and were only there because of their interest in William and Watchers in general.

They'd spend the whole evening asking me about him and what it was having him in my life. They kept telling me how cool it was, how jealous they were and how they wished they had a Watcher of their own.
I soon gave up and resigned myself to being single.

I'd been a keen jogger before William had appeared to fuck up my life. After the disastrous attempts at dating I decided I needed to do something to pick up my battered and bruised ego. So I started jogging again in the evenings after it had got dark.

My night runs did me a world of good. Although I knew William followed me close behind, it felt as if I had time and space to myself. My

black mood slowly started to lift and life seemed better than it had in months.

I'd continued to have monthly visits from the three government stooges but they did little more than check that William was still around and hadn't done anything as radical as actually interact with me or my surroundings.

Then one day I had a visit from just the woman, Ms Thompson. I opened the door and was surprised to see she had her own Watcher with her. She raised her eyebrows as she came into the apartment and it materialised beside her.

'You have one now,' I said, stating the obvious.

'Indeed. Bit of a shock to the system to be honest despite doing this for a job. You'd think I'd know what to expect. But of course unless it's actually happened to you...'

I nodded, 'Yeah, it's a hell of a thing.'

We sat and had coffee and watched the two Watchers. By now I'd mastered the technique of seeing William without looking directly at him, meaning I didn't feel ill or like my mind was crawling. They huddled next to each other with no discernible recognition, reaction or acknowledgement of each other.

They looked similar but, like people, each Watcher was unique. William's eyes were slightly larger and his face narrower than Ms Thompson's. Hers had longer legs and a more hostile appearance.

I explained how I'd been getting on. Ms Thompson advised me that a local Watchers support group had started a few weeks earlier and that it might do me some good to go along to meet some people with the same concerns as myself.

'You'll find it beneficial, dear,' she said smiling at me, 'I've started attending one near my own home and it's helped me feel less alone with this.'

I turned up at the local Watchers support group a couple of days later, feeling anxious. I didn't know what to expect and I wasn't sure that being in a room filled with Watchers was going to a pleasant experience.

The meeting was being held at a local community centre in one of those soulless and clinical rooms that makes you feel like you're back in school. I was first there. Luckily there were kitchen facilities and a few

minutes later I sat down with a hot cup of coffee in hand and nervously waited for the others to turn up.

There were nine of us all together, six women and three men, ranging in age from teenager to elderly pensioner. Each had a Watcher and it was quite a sight to see all of them in such close proximity to each other.

I was made to feel very welcome and it was refreshing to be able to talk about things with people who had been going through similar experiences as me. However, after an hour or so I was starting to find it a bit much. These people seemed to have nothing else in their lives, whereas I sure as hell wasn't going to let William define me.

Thomas, a rather cute PR consultant with dark hair and an infectious smile, seemed to see things the same way as me. It was his second time to the meeting and when we found ourselves alone in the kitchen area during the break, he rolled his eyes at me, 'They're rather obsessive, aren't they?'

'Yeah, I know what you mean,' I said nodding, 'These people need to get a life.'

He laughed at that and we spent the next few minutes chatting and giggling about the others. When we returned to the group we sat down next to each other.

Thomas and I didn't bother with the support group after my first evening there, but we kept in touch and soon became good friends.
We were delighted to find that we had so much in common and our relationship blossomed. We lived locally, had similar musical tastes, we liked the same sort of holidays (though we both agreed we weren't sure we wanted to jet to Morocco or Iceland with our two Watchers accompanying us) we laughed at the same things and we both enjoyed reading. And, of course, we each had a Watcher.

Our first few dates were interesting. We went to the zoo, thinking it would cause minimal disruption to others and be less problematic than going to a fancy restaurant for dinner. Unfortunately, our Watchers freaked out the animals and a keeper by the rhino enclosure insisted we leave.

The cinema was equally unsuccessful, despite our hope that sitting in the dark would mean that most people would either fail to notice the Watchers or wouldn't be bothered by them. We were wrong on both counts and after a number of people had complained we found ourselves being escorted out of the theatre with the film still running.

In the end, our first successful date was a takeaway pizza and a DVD at my place. We both wondered afterwards what the Watchers thought about our lovemaking. For me it felt like we had an audience and actually added a bit of a thrill.

A few weeks after Thomas and I became a definite item, work informed I would only be receiving half a salary and that after a further six months my contract would be terminated. They felt that having a Watcher meant I was unsuitable for work and, because of new Watcher related laws that had been introduced; there was little I could do about it.

Unable to pay the rent, I packed up and moved in with Thomas.

Thomas started to join me on my jogging sessions along the canal path. He wasn't unfit, but he was unaccustomed to running and I invariably left him behind. I'd usually get to the end of the canal path five minutes before him and sit on the bench and wait for him to catch up.

One particular evening, a few weeks after I'd moved in with Thomas, we'd gone jogging and as I neared the end of the canal path I was jumped on.

There were three of them. They dragged me off the path and onto a patch of waste ground hidden by knee deep grass and bushes. When I tried to scream I was punched in the face, hard.

It was all a blur. They were grabbing me and pulling off my clothes. I fell to the ground and landed on my back. William was above me, watching as unmoved as ever. Those assaulting me laughed at that.

I put up one hell of a fight, struggling for all I was worth, but it was no good. One of them climbed on top of me and, after punching me in the face again, slammed my head backwards onto the ground. Everything went back.

I woke up in a hospital bed. Thomas sat in a chair next to me, a look of worry on his face. 'Thank god,' he said when he saw that I was conscious. Above and behind him I could see our two Watchers.

'What happened?' I asked, 'I thought they were going to kill me.'

'Thanks to William, they didn't.'

'What?' I asked incredulous, 'William actually did something?'

Thomas half laughed, 'Of course not. But coming along the canal path I saw him off to the left, above the bushes. When I stopped I could

hear a struggle. I managed to beat them off you and they ran off. Then I used my mobile to call an ambulance.'

That was when I noticed his bruises.

I was released from hospital a couple of days later. I had a couple of broken ribs but thankfully was otherwise ok. From then on we made sure we jogged together.

A couple of months later I was standing in the en suite bathroom, grinning with joy at the positive result from my pregnancy test. 'Thomas,' I called, 'Come here.'

He popped his head round the door, 'Good news?'

I nodded, smiling, 'We're going to have a baby.'

'Yes!' He stepped into the room and gave me a huge hug. Then he felt me tense and stepped back, 'What's wrong?'

'William's gone,' I said simply, looking up at the blank space where he'd been a moment earlier.

'Oh my god.'

It was incredibly strange to no longer have William watching over me. I suddenly felt like part of me was missing, like I was incomplete in some way.

I gradually adjusted to life without my own Watcher and over the next couple of weeks cases of others around the globe losing their Watchers began to be reported. Thomas soon experienced the same sense of loss as his Watcher disappeared, and our lives returned to full normality.

Less than a month after William had vanished, all traces of Watchers had disappeared from the Earth. We never did find out what they were doing here, but for me the positive impact on my life was huge.

HE WHO DARES

Michael B Fletcher

He shivered, ripples running over his small form. *No,* he thought, *that'll never do. Stop it!* The possibility of attracting her attention, of allowing her to know he was there was unnerving. He pulled his head tighter into his body, willing himself to immobility, hoping that he'd been unobserved.

A few moments passed. Emboldened by the inactivity he reached out a tentative leg. *Good,* he thought. *Good.* He kept moving forward until he was out in the open, exposed.

He could just see her, back turned, not far away. He almost forgot himself, about to rush in and get closer to this most perfect of beings, but he ignored the impulse. He knew the only opportunity he had was using guile and stealth.

Each move closer was a study in slow, steady movement. Nothing heard; nothing felt.

She was larger than he anticipated, and desirable. He adored her black skin and perfect form.

He paused, tempted to reach out and touch her but even this close it would still be a mistake. He moved carefully until he reached the most desired place. His passion was screaming to work its way through his body but with utmost effort he held it in, positioning himself with extreme care.

Then he snapped; overwhelmed by his instincts he thrust deep inside her. Forgetful of all his caution, lost in this overwhelming moment. He may not have been her first suitor but he was determined to be her last.

Eight sets of multi-faceted eyes gazed dispassionately at him. A pair of jagged jaws moved and cut through his head. Yet he continued to mate with the giant female until his body's vigour was spent.

She enjoyed the protein rush as she chewed through his brain, unaware and uncaring of the next generation's future.

GREEN SKY BLUES

G K Murphy

Frederick and his long-term, long-suffering live-in lover Anna were watching TV when the emergency bulletin streamed across the screen, a metaphor for life ending. Frederick swore and cursed whilst Anna paced the lounge nervously and explained that when the local nuclear reactor blew its top and sprayed radioactive material into the atmosphere, which turned the skies a sickly and unhealthy pea-green - they ought to get the fuck away fast – and as testament to this, even the sun could not be seen anywhere amid all this mess.

Anna and Frederick were simply village yokels just as entranced with the news bulletins as the next man. They were nothing special – nothing worth writing home about – simply a young couple who were co-habiting in Frederick's parents' summer home whilst the parents travelled Europe.

"The roads will be blocked," Frederick protested. "We should wait for orders from the military or the police as to what are actions should be. It'll be on the television – I'm positive."

In this small Russian village, it was difficult to accept or comprehend such beauty and scenic grace could be ruined forever – but Anna certainly had a point. They could run and escape or stay and suffer – and hope for meagre salvation.

Frederick said, "We must wait, Anna. This is inland Russia… our police and military are the best in the world and the authorities won't just leave us here and abandon people in danger, the people of Gorgon Valley…"

Anna hissed vehemently, "Look out of the window, Frederick… what do you see, you fool? Green – a green sky with a swamped, blotted out un. They've already deserted us and left us here to rot and die… we'll die of radioactive poisoning, for sure."

"We don't know if it's radioactivity… we're not sure. The explosion was just twenty minutes ago…"

"The sky is fucking green!"

Frederick walked over to the window and peered out into the fields of corn and barley on this unnatural day. There were no signs of life anywhere, just a vast open space of yellow plantation stretching for acre upon acre. It was a beautiful portrait of sorts, the type which, photographed and captured on film for good, might adorn a calendar page to signify summer was here in the pretty Gorgon Valley.

"I think we should just wait, Anna. I've a fantastic idea…"

"What's your stupid idea? I should've stayed in Sweden instead of coming here."

"Let's fuck – it might be for the last time. Let's lick, kiss and caress every inch of each other's bodies, submit to lust and explore our sexual fantasies."

Anna felt somehow bizarrely tempted by the notion but said, "You're out of your fucking pathetic little mind…"

He placed his hands on her shoulders and grinned like a maniac of the first order. "Let's fuck like rampant wild dogs, Anna…what do you say? I know you want to, truly, really…"

She brushed his hands off violently and backed off. "You're insane, aren't you?"

"The root of my cock is pulsating madly – ready to explode. I want to shower your tits with golden piss…"

Confused, she frowned, "But, Frederick…"

Did she honestly expect him to say something else?

Why on earth would he want to piss on her?

Abruptly, Frederick unzipped his trousers and released the throbbing wee man. Anna gasped – she'd never seen it so big.

"Suck it," he demanded. "Take it in your mouth and suck it, you whorish slut."

Anna sighed and felt a tingling deep in her crotch as her pussy ignited.

"I refuse, you bastard."

He walked closer to her as she retreated further backwards. Anna knew she was about to be raped unless her reactions were quicker than his. She kicked him between the legs – this monster who she thought she loved and would probably marry one day – a creature and disgusting pervert and perhaps worse. Who could tell what this freak was capable of in these desperate times?

When she did unleash the kick that landed n his knackers, she laughed, turned and ran for the door whilst Frederick collapsed in pain, mouth open wide and groaning as he clutched his waning swollen dick and dangly bits. The agony intensified as his knees hit the floor, causing his balls to ache and reverberate. “I’m sorry, Anna… please forgive me!”

But Anna was gone – heading towards home in Sweden.

Frederick staggered towards the open front door of the tiny cottage, hoping he might follow her. But she was an athlete, fit, strong and agile, suddenly miles away. Yup – he’d blown it with his lovely Anna.

“Anna…” he murmured, as his eyes filled with pained tears.

There could be no response to his sorrowful, disgraced mutterings now, since all he could do was watch her sprint away into the distance like a departed ghost. Frederick wished he could drive a car after her. Frederick wished he had a car…

Suddenly, he remembered his flagging member and protruding ball-sack and staggered into the garden. Momentarily, a long shadow was cast over him in the green-tinged area, perhaps made by a flock of birds huddled in a bunch as they traversed the sky, or maybe not. Maybe something wholly different…

Maybe not, after all…

Some of these black creatures descended and landed on the drive, in the garden, on the roof of the cottage… these were not birds, either, even if they had wings and flew – no, still not birds – they were something Frederick had never seen or could possibly identify. These things were a direct and absolute product of high-cost and wholly intensified radioactivity. Mutated, regenerated beasts, vile and bloodthirsty… there was no escape from this dark pack of brutes as they charged and covered his body.

The local tarantula population had transmuted and become huge black vampire-spiders that would go on to cause major havoc and scenes of abject horror in the community. They would also develop a taste for human blood – in particular, human brains once the spiders burrowed through the tough bone of the exposed skull.

Anna heard the screams but wisely didn’t stop or consider going back and retracing her steps on a misguided whim and investigate matters – as much as she wanted, for Frederick was her man and partner, her knight in shining

armour, her rock – and self-indulgent, perverted bastard she had quickly exposed and realized was someone she could live and exist on the planet without and never encounter again on life's journey – never again in a month of Sundays. Even if Frederick had always been there with a shoulder to cry on. And yes, he might have been a pervert, but in the sack so was she, when Sweden and Russia met in torrid lust, where anything might have happened and usually did. But to think of sex at a time like this was borderline insane – even if it was hardly sex he suggested – and more like a repulsive golden shower he harped on about in no uncertain terms.

She ran as fast as she could and wouldn't stop until she reached Gorgon Valley town centre. It didn't seem so far away…

Yet all this running made her realise how much she smoked and drank and how drastically unfit she was, although on the cusp of 40-and-counting-the-months until then, she had still imagined she'd be fitter and more durable. Now her chest heaved and her knee-joints ached as she careered up the long deserted dirt track leading through the fields, with blasts of yellow plantation on either side. How she yearned for sweet little Sweden with passion and Sweden's cosmos of sinners and saints. Russia had too many villains, too many dark figures which seemed to emerge from inside the shadows when least expected, or creep up on you whilst you were sleeping, ready to kill if needs be, ready to poison – ready to haunt you for the entirety of your visit. The news-reels had it sussed – a truly scary and secret place and worse if you rubbed the people up the wrong way. It consisted of a very private population.

Suddenly, a shadow-inducing darkness filled the heavens and as Anna faltered slightly in her stride, she paused to arch her neck and tilt her head to look up and observe what she imagined was a vast swarm of crows escaping the vicinity and its pollution. Not crows, though – not in a green sky.

There was the pungent aroma of fetid chemicals and burning rubber when she finally slowed down and doubled up to rest and get her second wind. Again, she cursed Frederick, "Damn you, I hate you…" and wished desperately to turn around and run straight back into his warm and loving embrace… her Russian boyfriend, so tall and strong, and so damned cute.

"Anna…" came the voice.

Bemused, she frowned as her heart pounded in her chest and she looked around for the source, but there was nobody to be seen. Surely

Frederick couldn't have run that fast from the cottage and caught up with her? He smoked 40 a day, for starters…

"Frederick… go jump off a steep cliff." She said this, knowing his presence – although probably welcomed – was impossible.

He would have had to have flown to get here so rapidly.

The birds-or-whatever cast a further increasing shadow again. It shifted and grew across the greenery, a lurid colourful luminosity which stretched across and covered the vicinity.

Finally, the creatures dropped. At first she saw, with comic disbelief, followed by abrupt horrified certainty, these black crawling shapes had, indeed, come here for her alone and that was all they desired today. She jerked, jumped in her skin and screamed when she felt the first two or three of the huge winged-tarantulas land on her person and scurry over her body.

Frederick hovered and slowly drifted from above her head, until making a terrifying touchdown before her on the road. It looked wholly effortless, yet grotesquely, the other creatures seemed to step back and fall aside into the shadows, for they had a new master controlling their movement, a human-warrior sort, one that was coherently deranged and possessed a mind overrun by evil and perversion.

"…Frederick?"

"I've come for you, Anna. I possess a great gift that we can share and exploit. Just give yourself to me and submit… like you really want to. It's completely painless, just biting, blood, gore and stuff, you cheerless slut!"

"No!" she screamed, clutching her face with her hands and staring madly. "Please, don't do this… I'll do anything, anything you want me to, just let me live…"

But Frederick wasn't exactly himself anymore.

Gone were the two arms and legs, so that all that stood there now before Anna was a black, twisted and hairy, spindly, eight-legged devil, a sickening abomination with Frederick's head alone sitting atop its body, supported by long blackened wings which protruded from its deformed back. His eyes seemed to glow neon-white, milky with the promise of impending doom for every living thing.

"You're not my Frederick," Anna protested, spitting her words, "You're a mutated beast…" and, all the while, the 'smaller' spiders were climbing her body and exploring its curves and contours, biting her legs, her arms, her back, the tender flesh of her neck, "…It isn't so… none of this… I

know it's an awful dream, I know it is… things like this don't happen in the world…"

Frederick grinned, as saliva drooled along his chin, "Too weird, eh?"

"Yes," she agreed quickly, "Too weird… I dream this shit every night and wake up… and everything is fine and hunky-dory…"

When the vampire-spiders sucked her blood, thick bristle emerged from the wounds instantaneously as she changed and transformed into one of them. She altered and changed, her body began to vibrate and mutate whilst becoming hairier and the many legs sprouted. It was a painless pleasure when she transformed, as she was swept away in euphoric glee.

The two lovers met each other in the middle of the road as their scurrying accomplices gathered and awaited the spoken command from their newly-appointed saviour and leader. Soon their number would multiply as they moved across Russia and across the borders into Central Europe and beyond, taking each human in turn until eventually taking everywhere and everyone.

This was just the start…

It heralded mankind's fall from grace and the revolutionary rise of the mutated flying arachnid.

This was the beginning of the end.

Anna and Frederick addressed the gathered crawling flock and rolling sea of blackness spreading across the fields in their growing numbers. The spider-class had new leaders and understood the meaning of command – delivered from either the man or woman in their midst below. Whatever – the swarm would obey everything they were told, just glad to have a purpose, a mission.

The young mutated couple lifted their arms and immediately began to levitate.

The spiders rose, too – flocking around the part-human couples' heads, willing to follow wherever they led. Frederick took Anna's right hand and she reciprocated with a single tender kiss to the cheek. The horde took to the skies and headed for Central Europe and other destinations on land and overseas. As the radioactivity spread and polluted Europe, many changes would occur and much by way of obscene human transition and grisly murder would prove widespread. Soon the tarantula-elite would be everywhere and the skies would eventually turn from green to black.

YEAR OF THE SPIDERS

DJ Tyrer

“Have you noticed the bushes?”

I looked at Janet. “I was aware they were there.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Well, say what you mean, then.”

“Look around you, Sam,” she said, gesturing about us. We were walking down the gentle slope that led from the block of flats where we lived to the car park between the hedged banks that lined the way.

I did as she had asked and looked at the bushes on either side of us. “Well?”

She groaned and asked me if I was blind. “I’m talking about the webs. See, the bushes are covered in them.”

“Oh, you’re right!” They were festooned with layer upon layer of spider webs beaded with the morning dew that practically tented them. Blindingly obvious now, they were easily overlooked by the inattentive, as I’d been, as there were often webs in the bushes, only not to this extent. It was quite phenomenal and must have been the work of dozens and dozens of spiders. “They’re absolutely covered in them.”

“I don’t like them; not so many, I mean,” she told me. “Individual webs can be beautiful with dew on them like tiny jewels; you know, proper webs, not these ones – these are like nets.” She was right: the webs that covered the bushes lacked the definition of the smaller, circular webs that had been more evident in the past, being more extensive, more interwoven and somewhat ragged or unkempt in appearance.

I paused to look at one of the more heavily choked bushes. There was no sign of any spiders on the surface of the webbing, possibly they had no liking for the damp, but I thought I could discern some movement within the depths of the bush.

“Well,” I replied, “as long as they stick to their bushes and don’t come inside, I’m not bothered.”

I should’ve been.

~~~

“Did you hear about Mr Schmidt?” Janet asked a couple of days later as I came in the door.

“No. Yum, that smells good.”

“It’s goulash; I thought I’d try a new recipe.”

“Well, if it tastes half as good as it smells, it’ll be great. You said something about Mr Schmidt?” He lived in the next block and would often be seen shuffling around paying court to the local cat population.

“Yeah, he’s in hospital.”

“Oh, what happened?” He was what people call a ‘character’ – a bit odd, but likeable.

“Heart attack. Sally found him out the back. He’s in a real bad way.”

“Oh dear.”

Conversation turned to our days at work and we put the man’s misfortune aside. He died about a week later, but by then we had other things on our minds.

~~~

“That’s the third spider today,” Janet complained on Saturday. “It’s as if a new one appears to take the place of each one I kill; you never see two at the same time.”

The spiders were becoming a nuisance. To be honest, I’m a bit of an arachnophobe and would much prefer not to see them. Although she wasn’t scared of spiders as such, Janet wasn’t too keen to have so many around, particularly when they weren’t the regular house spider sort. They weren’t huge, but had fairly bulbous grey bodies, the long legs and obvious fangs of a wolf-spider, making them unpleasant to spot scuttling past. They were also big and squishy enough to make a nasty mess when you squashed them.

“They look like the sort in the bushes, the ones that spun all that web.”

“But how are they getting in? Dammit, this one’s made a real mess of the carpet!”

“They must already have been inside before we sprayed that *Spider Stop* around; I swear we’ve done every way in. I’ll order a couple of spider

traps online; see if they do any good."

"I just wish they'd stay outside."

"Well, so do I. I guess they prefer being out of the elements."

"I suppose, really, we're being nasty," she sighed.

"Speak for yourself!"

"I mean, they eat all the nasty bugs and things. They're doing us a favour, if you think about it."

"I really don't care about that. If they do it discreetly when I'm not looking, great, but otherwise I'd take flies and things over them any day."

She laughed. "I'll ask you again when they're buzzing all around your food this summer."

"Nah, I'd still take the flies – they don't freak me out like these things do. Oh, man, look, there's another one! Get it! Get it!"

She tried to get it with the spray, but it got under the sideboard, seemingly unaffected. It scuttled out a moment later and she got it with her shoe.

"Thanks!"

"Let's hope it's the last one."

It wasn't. Although they didn't appear quite so frequently, they remained a ubiquitous presence despite my assiduous application of *Spider Stop* to every ingress I could think of. Our neighbours were also complaining about them.

"Look, there's some of that horrible web in the airing cupboard!" Janet told me one afternoon.

"The damn things are making themselves at home," I sighed. "I just don't know what to do about them."

"Mrs Blake, two doors down, says she's going to stay with her mother till her flat's clear; she's a real arachnophobe!"

"Maybe the landlord will do something about it..."

"Oh, I hope not!"

"Sorry?"

"I mean, if they do, they'll fumigate the whole place and we'll have to move out. That'll be a real pain."

"I guess so... But, if it got rid of them..."

"Well, it's not as if they've actually done anything."

"They don't need to do anything – they just have to be," I told her. "Do you know what Tommy Jones told me?" I asked after a moment's

silence, hoping to lighten the atmosphere.

"What?"

"He was weaving quite the most melodramatic tale of a horrible half-man, half-spider living upstairs in the block."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh. Apparently, it lurks on the ceiling of the passage waiting to drop down on hapless victims who enter the flat. He didn't explain why anyone would actually be entering the flat..."

"Well, if it's half-human, maybe it can use the phone to call for a repairman or something," she grinned.

"I suppose so. 'Come into my parlour' and all that, eh?" I laughed. "Wouldn't it be awful if there were spiders the size of people?"

Janet shuddered. "I think I would be scared of spiders, then. Still, I read they can't grow that big, really, so no need to worry."

"Yeah, just these ones to worry about," I said. spotting another.

~~~

Some days later, I answered a knock at the door and found our neighbour from down the passage, Jim Elliott, there.

"Hi, Jim. You okay?" He looked agitated and kept scratching the back of his hand.

"Yeah. You seen Mitzi?" Mitzi was his improbably-named little pug. Technically, we weren't supposed to have pets, but the rules had never been strictly enforced. Besides, nobody was going to argue with Jim; he was a big, shaven-headed guy who looked like some sort of hell-raising biker rather than the gentle giant who doted on his tiny dog.

"She gone walkabout?"

"Yeah. Opened the door last night for my pizza and she just ran out. I was out all night looking for her and no luck. I thought maybe somebody'd have seen her or taken her in or something, but no luck."

"Sorry, haven't seen her. I'll keep my eyes peeled and let you know if I see or hear anything of her."

"Thanks, mate."

"What happened to your hand?" It was looking pretty inflamed and the scratching had started it bleeding a little.
~~~

“Damn spider bit me,” he said, turning away to trudge disconsolately to the next flat.

I shut the door and went back into the lounge.

“Who was it?” Janet asked, looking up from her documentary.

“Jim from down the passage. Mitzi’s run away.”

“Oh dear. Poor guy must be upset!”

“He looked pretty down.”

“I hope Mitzi’s okay; she’s too pampered to make it as a stray. Have you noticed there seem to be a lot of missing pets at the moment?”

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. Haven’t you noticed all the missing posters around? You hear of petnappers – you know, stealing valuable pedigree cats and dogs for ransom or for breeding, or taking animals for vivisection and training fighting dogs and stuff like that. It’s awful! There must be a gang in the area...”

“Maybe... But, Mitzi just ran out the door, so I reckon she’ll turn up soon enough. Oh, and you know what else? The poor guy got bitten by a spider and his hand looks pretty nasty. I wonder if he has an allergy?” The general consensus was that the spiders weren’t poisonous.

“Perhaps he could adopt the spider if she doesn’t come back!” she joked, before turning back to the television.

~~~

Jim never did find Mitzi, as far as I know. The next time I saw him he was squatting in the corner of the car park. I assumed he was waiting in the hope of spotting his missing pet. Later I heard he’d been arrested for jumping out at Ella James and assaulting her; which was bizarre. Jim had always been incredibly polite to women and a gentle soul. I couldn’t credit that he was some sort of rapist, especially when I heard the rumour that he’d tried to tear out her throat with his teeth; if true, he’d turned into an absolute madman. It was as it our lovely quiet corner of the world had gone crazy.

~~~

“The spiders are getting worse,” Janet said. “There was a whole swarm of them scuttling across the green this morning.”

“Do spiders swarm? I thought they lived alone.”

She shrugged. “These do. Maybe you need to tell them they’re getting it wrong.”

“There seem to be more inside, too.”

“One nearly bit me yesterday; and one dropped on me from a tree the day before.”

“I’ve never seen so many.” I shook my head.

“It’s probably global warming; they’re multiplying 'cos it’s getting warmer. Or, maybe it’s chemicals: I read somewhere that a bunch of spiders in Mexico or some place like that started swarming around because of pollution.”

“You sure you aren’t thinking of that film where the chemical spill makes the spiders grow to gigantic proportions?”

She laughed. “Possibly. Or, maybe, they’ve been genetically engineered by some dodgy corporation and got loose.”

“Yeah and they’re on the rampage to avenge themselves on us for what we’ve done to the planet.”

She was suddenly serious. “But, you know, things have been pretty weird lately: all those pets disappearing and Jim turning out to be a psycho rapist. Maybe it really is something weird like chemicals. I’ve had a cold that just won’t shift and the old woman who lived in number ten died last week.”

“Well, she was old, darling.”

“Yeah, but still... I mean, there’s that scientist who says there’s a virus that can control our minds – cats are rife with it and something like half of us have it, too. Or, then, I was reading on the internet about chemtrails –”

“*What*-trails?”

“*Chem*trails. Chemicals sprayed from aircraft. The government are supposed to spray them to control our minds and stuff.”

“Sounds like a load of rubbish, to me.”

“I dunno. Those vapour trails they leave aren’t supposed to last long, but some do – those are supposed to be chemtrails. There’s something in them that prevents them from just dissipating, so the chemicals drift over a wide area.”

“Still sounds silly to me.”

“Well, what about comets?”

“Comets?”

“Yeah, comets. I’ve read there’s been a lot of them buzzing the Earth recently and they can carry all sort of chemicals and even alien viruses that can get into the atmosphere... Nobody knows what effect they might be having on the planet.”

“Sounds just as crazy to me. Next, you’ll be telling me that the Bilderbergers are behind it all.”

“Well, you never know...”

I had to laugh. “Nah, there’s probably a perfectly rational explanation.” Probably there was, but it didn’t do us much good.

~~~

By the end of the summer it was impossible to deny that something strange was going on with the spiders: we’d started to refer to it as ‘The Year of the Spiders’ as a joke, but it was becoming more of a nightmare. Even at the most basic level of just having them around, nightmare was the operative term: the damn things were becoming disturbingly common to the extent that there was almost always one on a wall or on the ceiling and sometimes several would be seen crawling around in shadowy corners. I felt permanently anxious having them around and Janet was getting pretty freaked out herself. Despite our best efforts with the duster, the thick sails of web kept appearing in the flat; the linen cupboard was thick with the stuff and it kept reappearing in the corners of all the rooms and behind the toilet.

~~~

“Sam,” Janet said as she came in from work, “I...” Her voice trailed away and she looked down at the floor, embarrassed.

“What is it, honey?” I asked, coming out of the kitchen where I’d been starting supper.

“Well, as I was coming home, I... I could have sworn some... thing was following me...”

“Following you?” I echoed, then my brain caught up with what she’d said. “Something?”

“Yeah. I thought it was a person. But, well, when I looked back, I saw something... scuttle into the shadows. Something large and, well, definitely

not human; too many limbs...”

“A huge spider?” I asked, sceptically.

“A huge spider-*thing*.” Her tone implied something out of my nightmares or children’s tall tales.

“Very funny,” I told her.

“I’m serious, Sam.”

“Seriously nuts.”

“Look, I’m not joking and I’m not crazy.”

She certainly sounded serious. “Sure, but it does sound nuts. Well, I doubt you saw some gigantic spider or a chemical mutant or anything like that. Probably you heard a noise and what with everything, you just freaked out a little and your imagination ran riot. I can’t say I blame you!”

“I guess so...”

We left it at that. I thought it was all so much nonsense – until I saw just such a strange shadow, like something too large to be a spider and with too many limbs to be a man, yet sharing the traits of both. I told myself that it was just an illusion, but my nightmares grew much worse after that...

~~~

I was startled by Janet’s shriek from the bathroom. I rushed through to find her sobbing and clutching at her ankle.

“What happened?” I asked, hugging her.

“A spider bit me! Ow-ow-ow! It hurts like hell!”

“Oh, darling!” I helped her through to the lounge.

Janet was in agony and her ankle was swelling, so I fetched the car and helped her hobble out, then drove her up to the hospital. We’d had one confirmed death from a spider bite and even though it had been put down to an allergic reaction rather than any deadly poison, we were both panicking.

“I’m scared, Sam!” she sobbed as I picked her up and carried her in.

She was examined and given an injection for the reaction and some antibiotics as the doctor said spider bites could get infected.

“It seems to be an allergic response,” he told us, “not the direct effect of a toxin.” I hoped he was telling the truth, but it was the same thing we’d been told when Sally Jones died and I think we all had our doubts about that. But he’d seemed very interested when he heard our address; he took photos of the bite and wrote more notes than I would’ve expected.
~~~

Still, Janet seemed rather better by the afternoon after having had her feet up for a while, even if I wasn't too happy about the inflamed wound.

"I'm seriously thinking we should move out till they're gone," I told Janet the next day as I examined the still-inflamed bite. A couple more of our neighbours had left to stay with friends or family and one, a severe arachnophobe, had managed to get rehoused. The problem for most of us was that we had nowhere to go and couldn't afford to relocate.

"Well, I heard they're planning to fumigate."

"They really couldn't not, could they? Not now." With a death and her severe reaction, which I'd already phoned through to our landlord, I was certain they would have to take action. In this age of 'Health and Safety' there was no way in which the issue could be ducked by our landlord or the council.

"No, something has to be done."

Something was: there was a knock on the door that evening from a man in a suit who introduced himself as being from the council.

"Given the situation, we'll be fumigating all the blocks tomorrow. You'll have to leave. Here's a letter with all the details."

He didn't stop to answer questions, having the rest of the block to alert.

The letter told us that we had to leave everything – to not even pack toiletries or a change of clothes – so I guess they were genuinely worried about the infestation being spread. It said we'd be picked up by a coach at a point about half-a-mile down the road and taken to our temporary housing. We would receive a payment to cover our relocation costs, replacement clothes and the like that wouldn't preclude a compensation payout, if necessary. As inconvenient as leaving everything behind would be, I was glad to be going...

~~~

We left the next morning, stepping out into the cool autumn morning air first thing. Our neighbours were also leaving, bleary-eyed and occasionally carrying the bags and cases we'd been instructed not to bring. Janet was still hobbling from the bite, but told me it was okay, except for the itch.

"Just look at the web!" Janet exclaimed as we left.
~~~

I'd noticed sheets of webbing amongst the plants on several balconies and even covering entire windows, but it was worse than ever with substantive spreads covering several balconies. There seemed to be even more than there had been the day before and it had been impressive then. It seemed as if the spiders were determined to tent over entire buildings.

"Oh, hell!" I exclaimed, barely able to get the words out and suddenly feeling as if I would wet myself. The webs were coming alive with spiders, swarming with them. They must have been hatching a new generation.

"I knew we should have left already!" Janet exclaimed. Despite still hobbling, she began to move quickly, crying, "Come on!"

We joined our neighbours in a panicked rush, the bags and cases suddenly abandoned, dropped to trip those behind. Some fell and one or two didn't rise, being trampled. There were shouts and screams as people sought to avoid the spiders or found themselves swarmed over and bitten.

Those of us with the greatest fear led the way, desperate to evade the spiders, whether or not they were actually likely to be dangerous. I'm ashamed to say that I left Janet behind and took my place at the head of the stampede.

We ran to the designated spot where half-a-dozen coaches waited for us and scrambled aboard, desperate to leave our homes and their arachnid occupiers behind. I was grateful to see Janet was amongst those who arrived behind me; she was too distraught to complain at my abandonment.

As the coaches climbed the hill that led to the city proper, I heard a voice call: "Look!" and turned to see what the excitement was. One of our neighbours was pointing towards the blocks.

"Dammit, will you look at that?" someone else exclaimed, also pointing. "What is it?"

There were thousands of strands of white floating up into the air and lazily drifting in our direction on the soft morning breeze like a reverse-shower of gravity-defying snow. It was almost mesmerizing to behold and, for a moment, I couldn't work out what it could be. Then, my mind slipped back to a documentary I'd once seen and an image of dozens of spiders taking to the air by tossing up strands of silk to catch the breeze; apparently they could travel miles on the wind that way. I shuddered at the sight as I realised the spiders would follow us into the city, that we had not truly escaped them after all.

I wanted to believe that they would disperse and go their separate ways when they landed, but I had a sick feeling they wouldn't, that they would continue to swarm and cluster and spin their broad, ugly webs, then take once more to the air and spread yet further until their webs covered the entire city and perhaps even the entire country or even the world, assisted by shadowy, human-sized beings that had no right to exist outside of nightmares.

I prayed that such fancies were madness and that the spiders could be controlled and that freakish spider-things just couldn't exist, but what I'd seen made them seem horribly plausible as we drove along. trailing the aerial migrants in our wake.

Beside me, Janet idly rubbed at her ankle, whilst gazing out of the window at the spiders with a strange half-smile on her lips.

BENEATH THE ORCHID

Micke Lindquist

The petals - red, pink and purple
Caught your eye in the shop
Such an exotic flower
And look at the price!
So you brought that orchid home

Quite a bargain, indeed
You got more than you paid for
You didn't know it then
But trust me, you'll find out

Sometimes exotic plants
Bring exotic pets
Hiding in the pot
Beneath the damp earth
Nestled between the roots

An unwilling stowaway
That crossed an ocean

To sit on your window sill
It might stay there for a while
Maybe jetlagged from the trip

I hope you don't have a cat
Because this curiosity will kill it
Your new pet can't wait forever
Hiding beneath the orchid.

GENETIC EXPERIMENT

Bruce H. Markuson

At eight years old I was afraid of spiders. One day, I heard my mother scream from the garage.

She came inside with the phone to her ear and told me, “Timmy, there’s a spider hanging from the ceiling in the garage. Go in there and get it.”

“But Mommy, I’m afraid of spiders.”

“Hold on a minute,” she said over the phone then grabbed me by the collar of my shirt and dragged me into the garage.

“Timmy, you need to face your fears.” She closed the door behind me.

Sure enough, there was a huge spider the size of my thumb hanging from the ceiling by its web. Then, something else crawled in. Another spider. This one was twice the size of me. Yes, literally twice the size of me. I rubbed my eyes and had to look again to make sure I wasn’t hallucinating. It came into the garage to check out its little buddy hanging from the ceiling. I later learned that it was a genetic experiment that had escaped from a research lab.

Immediately, I stepped into the house and said to Mom who was still talking on the phone, “Mommy, the spider’s twice as big as me.” I held my hands over my head.

“Timmy, don’t lie to Mommy.” She pushed me back into the garage. “Now go in there and get that spider.” The door closed behind me.

“That boy needs some sense knocked into his head,” I heard her say into the phone. Then I saw the garage door closing trapping me in with the spider.

“Mommy, you locked me in with the spider,” I said in vain.

The switch to the garage door was on the other side of the spider. I pounded on the door, to no avail. That genetic experiment took its eight eyes off of the smaller spider then trained them on me.

“Mommy!” I screamed out.

Slowly, it walked towards me. I had to think. I grabbed a pitchfork and threw it towards the monstrosity. It stuck into its side. The handle

dragged along the floor as it moved. I grabbed an axe and whacked at its head. It lodged in one of its eight eyes. Still, it kept moving towards me. I saw the snow blower. It had an electric start. It roared to life as I ran it across the room and rammed it into the spider. The snow blower made a grinding sound then shut off as one of the spider's limbs got caught in the blades. For the moment that held it at bay.

"Knock, knock, knock," I heard from the other side of the door. "Timmy, stop goofing off and get that spider."

What did she think I was doing, playing Frisbee in the garage?

I screamed out. "Mommy, it's a really big spider. Maybe you should call the police or fire department."

"Timmy, Mommy said get that spider."

Slowly it moved towards me, dragging the snow blower and the pitchfork as it came. Quickly I moved to my Dad's workbench.

"Now we're talking." I said out loud.

Then the spider picked me up and was ready to devour me between its two pincers. I grabbed my Dad's circular saw, turned it on, locked the switch, then jammed a pencil into the blade safety leaving the spinning blade open. I shoved it between the pincers and into its mouth. The thing spasmed in pain as it swung me back and forth. I grabbed Dad's nail gun and "Pow, pow, pow," over and over again I drove nails into that hairy beast.

Another knock on the door, "Timmy, I'd better not see that spider. Now Mommy told you to take care of it.

Next, I noticed Dad's electric chain saw. "Still plugged in." I said to myself.

I grabbed it and took off one limb. It lifted me up in the air. I cut that limb off too and fell to the floor. Then, in about the center of its eight eyes, I started to cut it in half.

The door opened. "Timmy what's going on in there?" She wasn't watching me; she was still talking on the phone. "I give that boy a simple task and he raises havoc in the garage." She slammed the door closed again.

Blood and spider parts sprayed all over me as the thing twitched back and forth. "Finally, finally it was dead," I said, as I put my right foot on the corpse, holding the chain saw in the air. I grabbed my cell phone out of my pocket and took a few selfies. After hacking away at its limbs with the axe,

I made a crude necklace out of spider claws and walked into the house covered in spider guts and hair.

Mommy wasn't even looking at me when she pointed to another spider on the kitchen counter. Just a little thumb sized spider. "Timmy, get that spider as well."

I slammed it with my fist then heard its exoskeleton crunch between my teeth as I ate it.

I ain't afraid of spiders anymore.

SPIDER MINE

Thomas M. Malafarina

It was supposed to be a simple forty-five minute guided tour of a former working coalmine. It was supposed to be entertaining, unique, uneventful and, most importantly, safe. However, things don't always turn out according to plan; despite the fact that the Ashton, Pennsylvania Chamber of Commerce website mine touted the mine tour as one of the best on the east coast.

Stephen thought as he sat fidgeting, second-guessing his decision to take part in the tour, "Chamber of Commerce "my butt… chamber of horrors is more like it." He had been reluctant to agree to experience Ashton's "Miner's Tunnel" tourist attraction but his girlfriend Mattie, a native of the small town, had harassed him into doing so. He was a bit miffed at her for putting pressure on him and perhaps even angrier with himself for caving in. "Caving in?" he thought to himself, "Not the best choice of words when you're about to go a mile down in a mine car."

It wasn't so much that Stephen had a fear of the dark or even was significantly claustrophobic. It was more about the assortment of creepy-crawly critters he suspected might live down there in the dank musty environment, skittering about among its ancient rotting timbers.

In particular, he worried about those horrible eight legged creatures he feared more than anything else; even more than the potential for being buried alive under tons of collapsed earth and suffering a slow and suffocating death. Perhaps it was because he understood the chances of a collapse occurring were virtually non-existent, but the odds of his meeting up with that particular breed of horrifying insect would be more than likely.

He probably should have said something to Mattie about his arachnophobia, but the idea of doing so just rubbed him the wrong way. Mattie was different from most of the other girls he had known and dated. He didn't want to say she was a tomboy or was overly masculine; that might indicate some things about himself he was in no hurry to address, but she was a bit rougher around the edges than most girls were.

He had often wondered where that edge might have come from. Now that he'd visited her hometown, gotten to meet her family and friends, he wondered no more. Stephen was raised as an upper middle class kid from the suburbs of Northern Philadelphia. He had gone to a good high school and was studying at Penn State University Park Campus where he met Mattie. She, on the other hand was from this tough blue-collar working class town which seemed to have a bar on every other corner.

There was a roughness also inherent in the way everyone spoke in Ashton, even the women. Not to say they were crude or vulgar but different than what he was accustomed to. These people were all descendents of nineteenth century immigrant miners from Europe and their accents were a mix of English, Irish, Italian, Polish and other such European backgrounds which also gave the pronunciation of their words an equally odd roughness as well. Mattie still had a slight trace of the accent even though she had been away from the area for several years at school. However, Stephen noticed as soon as they returned to Ashton and she began speaking with friends and family, that slight trace became a much heavier accent almost immediately.

Stephen looked over at the heavy wooden doors of the mine, knowing in just a few seconds they would be opening and he and the rest of his companions would be transported by rail down into the bowels of the earth. He felt fairly certain all precautions had been taken to ensure the safety of the mine visitors. Likewise he assumed there would be adequate lighting, even down in the deepest recesses of the mine.

He had convinced himself that these precautions plus the constant flow of tourists might frighten the tiny creatures back into the shadows. But in his heart, he suspected none of these things could do much to keep them all completely away; the worms and ants and yes, the spiders. After all, the mine was their home and they had as much if not more right to be there than the humans.

Chances were most people didn't give such creatures a second thought. However, Stephen wasn't like most people. He had a fear; a real and crippling fear of spiders. It had plagued him since childhood and even back then, no matter how much his mother tried to convince him how irrational his fear was, it nonetheless persisted. It stayed with him through childhood, into adolescence and followed him into adulthood. And it was making its horrible presence apparent at this very minute.

He sat in the open passenger car, hands folded, clasped tightly between his fidgeting knees. His feet seemed to involuntarily tap out their own nervous rhythm as if oblivious to his frantic commands for them to remain still. He was one of about fifteen other tourists, including Mattie. There were four cars filled with an equal number of people,e all excited for the tour to begin.

Stephen was wondering why he'd agreed to such a stupid idea. What had he been thinking? Was it really that important for him to appear so brave for Mattie? If they were to have a future together, shouldn't he be completely honest with her? But then he thought again of the tough edge which seemed to surround her, her family and everyone in Ashton. No, he realized he had to suppress his fears or he would likely lose Mattie for good. The mine car moved slightly with a jolt and it took everything Stephen had not to let out an involuntary screen.

His terror must have shown on his face because Mattie asked, "You ok, Stephen? Ya looked like ya seen a ghost or sometin'".

"Um… no… no…" Stephen stammered, "I'm… I'm fine… it was just that… that sudden movement… the jostling of the mine car… you know… it was a bit… startling is all."

"Maybe dis wasn't sucha good idea," Mattie said, her excitement appearing to fade with Stephen's discomfort, replaced by concern. Stephen realized for the first time just how annoying Mattie's accent was suddenly becoming to him. It seemed the longer they were in Ashton the more she reverted to what he thought of as that horrid brogue.

He momentarily fought back his own discomfort and annoyance and said, "It's ok, Mattie… Really… Besides, this is your town. Surely you must have taken this mine tour a dozen times before. Right?"

"Well…" she said hesitantly, "Actually I never did. Growin' up… well… I wus always too sceart ta go down in da mine. Dis is a first fer me too."

"But… but if you didn't want to do it… then why are we here?" he asked, confused.

Mattie looked at him shyly and explained "Well… I always wanted ta take the tour but I was too afraid. I figgered it might be easier if I did it wit you. You kin be here ta protect me."

Stephen looked on in astonishment, not only at Mattie's revelation but at her ever-increasing change in speech pattern. She was starting to sound

just like everyone else in the strange town. He realized he was going to have to rethink this whole relationship once this weekend was over. He didn't think he could seriously spend the rest of his life listening to that annoying accent, no matter how beautiful Mattie might be.

But then again, maybe it wasn't her fault. Maybe it was him. Perhaps it was just his stress which was causing him to think so irrationally. He really liked Mattie. In fact, he was pretty sure he was falling in love with her. And this was who she was. This was Mattie. He had to get a grip. It must be the fear of going into the mine causing all of these irrational feelings.

Stephen thought, "Wonderful. Now not only do I have to worry about not showing Mattie how terrified I am but I'm supposed to be her hero as well!"

Suddenly the mine doors opened, revealing a dimly lit blackened orifice as the cars began to enter the darkness. To Stephen it looked like the giant maw of some demonic beast swallowing the cars one by one. A cold sweat began to trickle down his back. As his car passed through the opening; he felt the temperature drop. They had all been given jackets and sweaters to wear because the temperature inside the mine was around sixty-five degrees all year round.

The tour guide was dressed like a nineteenth century coal miner and was seated at the front of the car, watching his passengers. Stephen suspected with all the noise from the rattle mine cars the guide probably had to wait until a stopping point either along the way or at the bottom to offer his monologue.

Then, as if Stephen somehow had willed it, the cars stopped along the downward slope and the tour guide stood to begin speaking. His presentation was given in coal region accent which was even thicker and heavier than he had been hearing from Mattie. Stephen was only paying half attention as the man spoke about air shafts or something like that having to do with venting mine gasses up to the surface and allowing for fresh air to come in. He was too focused on looking at one particular one.

The shafts were timber framed openings about three feet square that were cut up through the earth to the surface. Stephen noticed how the timbers along the bottom portion of the square were positioned to form a ladder, obviously so a mine worker could crawl up to perform maintenance. The shaft he was looking in was lit with bright spotlights providing

illumination for about twenty feet up along the shaft. After that all that remained was blackness.

Stephen stared into the blackness at the far end of the shaft and for just a moment thought he saw something. It was only there for a split second then it was gone.

"What was that?" Surely it couldn't have been what he thought it was. Could it? He would have sworn he saw two glowing red eyes staring directly at him from out of the darkness.

The mine cars jerked as they once again began their decent further into the mine. Stephen did his best to beat down his growing anxiety. He shook his head to clear his mind of the image he thought he had just seen. Surely it had only been the result of his overactive imagination. Or maybe it was just a rat or something; not that a rat would be all that wonderful, it would still be better alternative to the picture which had suddenly appeared in his mind, that of a giant eight-legged creature; but that was ridiculous, he knew.

When they reached the bottom of the mine the narrow tunnel seemed to widen to a large cavernous area illuminated by bright lights. The tour guide announced, "Dis heer is da bottoma da mine. Ya kin all get outta yer cars 'n look 'round while I tell ya more about da mine."

One by one the tourists left their cars and huddled together near the back of the mine. Stephen looked around, scanning the ceiling looking for… he wasn't exactly sure what he was looking for. Maybe it wasn't so much what he was hoping to see but what he was hoping not to see. He was hoping not to see another one of those vent shafts.

What he did see however almost caused his heart to stop beating in his chest. It was a spider; a big one about an inch around. It crawled upside down along a piece of timber, its eight legs skittering across the moist beam. Stephen held back the girlish whimper forming in the back of his throat, fighting to escape.

The hideous creature crawled toward a large bore hole in the wood as Stephen looked on, paralyzed with fear. A second before the thing entered the blackness of the hole; it stopped and turned to look directly at Stephen. He was sure he was not imagining it. The creature was looking right at him.

What happened next was worse than any nightmare Stephen had ever experienced. In his mind he could hear a tiny voice forming. At first it was almost non-existent then it began to grow steadily in volume. The voice

repeated “We’ve been waiting for you… we are many… come and join us.” Then the creature’s tiny little face seemed to morph right before Stephen’s unbelieving eyes, taking on something resembling an almost human-looking appearance. Just before Stephen thought he could no longer hold in his scream the creature turned and dove into the bore hole and out of sight.

He felt a tug on his arm and Stephen’s head pivoted quickly, not sure of what he might see there. To his relief it was Mattie, pulling him in her direction.

“Check dis out, Stephen,” she said, leading him away from the crowd of tourists toward the far end of the mine. “Heer’s anudder onea dem vent shafts. Da guide tolt me dis one goes a mile straight up, all da way ta da surface.”

Stephen didn’t want to look up into the shaft, fearful of what he might see or more likely what might see him. He nonetheless reluctantly ventured a quick glance upward only to satisfy Mattie that he had done so.

“Yeah…” Stephen said. “Nice.”

Mattie looked at him with disappointment and said, “Come on, Stephen, you hardly looked at it.”

“That’s alright, Mattie,” he rationalized, “Seen one air vent you’ve seen them all.”

Mattie said slyly, “Well dat ain’t necessarily true, Stephen. I tink ya should look at dis one a little closer.”

Stephen noticed that none of the other tourists were facing him and Mattie. They were all listening to the guide giving his presentation. He thought he saw the guide looking their way for a second then his attention went back to his audience. He suddenly realized he and Mattie were alone now, off by themselves in the back of the mine. A cold chill came out of nowhere and ran down his spine.

“Go ahead, Stephen. Look up. What’s da big deal anyway? It ain’t like it’s gunna kill ya, fer Pete’s sake.”

Reluctantly, Stephen looked up into the blackness of the shaft and once again saw the same two fiery red eyes materializing out of the blackness.

“M… m… Mattie…?” Stephen managed to croak out.

“Wat’s wrong, Stephen?” Mattie said in a voice much too calm and collected for the situation which was unfolding. “Wat da ya see up der, Stephen?”

Stephen once again found himself paralyzed with fear by the glowing eyes which were moving closer. As they did he noticed an enormous black hairy insectile leg make its way into the light. Stephen's breath caught in his throat. Soon another leg materialized, then another. He could hear Mattie's voice in the background, sounding surprisingly distant.

"I might notta been completely honest wit ya, Stephen," she said as more of the creature came into view. Stephen could now see the head; its face. Oh God in Heaven what an impossibly hideous face!

Mattie was saying, "Ya see… well… I'been in dis heer mine before. Many times. In fact dis mine is very special to me… and to my friends… da members 'a my church."

"Church?" Stephen thought "What the hell is she talking about? Can't she see this horrid thing?"

Its face was pink, hairless and wrinkled, looking almost human had it not been for those two huge multi-faceted glowing insect eyes. Then then creature opened its wide salivating mouth, revealing rows upon rows of shark-like teeth. The beast had now made its way completely into the light just a few feet directly above Stephen's head. He looked up at it helplessly as Mattie continued speaking calmly.

"Dat's ar spiritual leader up der, Stephen. He provides us wit good fortune and healt. Den once a year we haffta give 'em wat he wants."

Two of the large hairy legs reached down out of the shaft and grabbed both sides of Stephen's head. It felt as if they might crush his skull.

Mattie said, "An sometimes… well sometimes he demands a sacrifice. An fortunately fer you, Stephen, you have da honor 'a bein' his sacrifice today."

Those were the last words Stephen heard as his body was lifted off the ground and pulled silently into the vent shaft, then into the waiting jaws of the spider creature. As his kicking feet disappeared into the ceiling, Mattie calmly smiled and quietly slipped back into the crowd of tourists boarding the cars, ready to head back out of the mine. She caught the eye of the tour guide who nodded knowingly to her. She returned the nod and gave a sly smile.

AN ANARCHY OF ARACHNIDS

Kerry E.B. Black

Natalie hated spiders. When faced with their spindly eight legs and multiple eyes shining like beetles, she cried. She leapt onto sofas at the sight of even the smallest. She refused to scream; afraid they might swing by their silken threads into her mouth. She changed her sheets daily and slept with a top-sheet covering her head to prevent unwanted arachnid incursions.

Her partner, Tory, shook his head. “Honey, you’re being ridiculous.”

“Maybe, but I don’t want any of those eight-legged beasts crawling into my mouth while I sleep. One could lay eggs in my mouth! Thousands of babies wriggling out.” Shudders wracked her at the thought.

Halloween brought macabre decorations, including fake spider webs with huge plastic occupants. She avoided party stores and costume shops from September until mid-November. Tory bought a remote-controlled tarantula as a prank. He lay hidden behind the couch, prepared to launch an attack when she returned from work.

She dragged herself over the threshold of their apartment, shoulders slumped with worries from a long work day. She hung her slicker and leaned against the wall. “What a day,” she said.

With a wicked grin, Tory set his minion free. He hoped the electronic hum that accompanied its progress would not betray the ruse, but the way the thing moved made it worth the cost. He struggled with a laugh when the robotic spider closed on his girlfriend.

Her lips pressed into a pained line and craters formed around her widened eyes. “mmmmmmm!” A high-pitched, close-mouthed squeal accompanied her hopping from foot to foot. Tory steered the thing toward her, backing her to the door.

She grabbed her coat and flung it atop the tarantula, then she leapt, landing with both feet onto the bulge.

“Hey!” Tory yelled, bursting from his hiding spot. “You crushed my new toy!”

Terror transformed into tears and Natalie ran from the apartment, lips quivering.

He felt a belated sense of regret. “Nat, wait,” but she didn’t hear. He felt the chill breezing through the door left open by her hasty departure. “She’ll be cold,” he thought. He stooped to grab her coat, casting a last sad glance at the crushed toy. Its legs twitched like electrified pipe-cleaners.

He felt tickling on his hand as he rushed after her. Her location eluded him. Pinpricks assailed his arms. They started to sting. “What the?” He flipped the coat to the other side. Dozens of thumbnail-sized spiders scurried over his hand and arms, biting as they went. He opened his mouth wide, hollering. A black-and-orange long-legged one flew by a gossamer thread onto his tongue. Spitting, slapping, hopping, he yelled with desperation until he blacked out.

He woke in the hospital several hours later, bandaged and with an I.V. dripping fluids into his arm. Natalie glared from a chair at the foot of the bed. She hugged her legs to her chest.

He opened his mouth to apologize but found it filled with something. Cotton? He swiped with his finger to dislodge it.

She recoiled, pale, her lips thin as a pencil line.

Spider-silk covered his fingers. He felt thousands of legs tickling the back of his throat and his soft palate.

THE JORŌGUMO'S DAUGHTER

K.Z. Morano

Daniel stared at the mottled maggot-like thing dangling between his thighs, dripping yellow putrescence onto the bathroom floor. He brought the torch towards the melting cocoon of flesh, yelping in pain as his bare skin came in contact with the searing heat. He was determined to burn the entire organ off. What he had mistaken for a sexually transmitted infection was no human disease at all. At first it manifested itself as a spasmodic pain affecting his entire pelvis and radiating towards his lower back. He observed his aching, itching, gelled waste-percolating penis for days as it gradually transformed into a throbbing larva-like monstrosity. Again and again, he cursed the memory of the exotic entertainer that he had met in one of the adult theaters in Tokyo.

The wretched thing twitched and expelled copious amounts of foul-smelling fluid. Then, one by one, tiny spiders began emerging from the slimy chrysalis. He screamed as the baby arachnids squeezed themselves out of the weeping wound orifice that used to be his urinary meatus. In what seemed to be the most agonizing hour of his life, Daniel gave birth to an entire colony of arachnids. Their small, fragile bodies poured out profusely from the miniature birthing hole, dropping and scuttling blindly, taking their first steps on the bathroom tiles.

First they came together to form a small mucus-glazed ball the size of a human infant's head. Then more spiders joined in, swarming and squirming to create a vile imitation of a plump torso and infant-like limbs. They crawled on top of each other, each tiny body pulsating, fidgeting; wriggling to the same horrid rhythm. Soon Daniel found himself staring into the two hollow cavities piercing the mock human head and the infernal black hole that quivered to let out a newborn's piercing scream.

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"Chloe, um, you kind of look like shit." Tara told me after History.
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It was true. My hair had turned dry and brittle and my complexion was unnaturally pale. Not that I was ever a beauty to begin with. I hadn't slept in days and I was fully conscious of my gross panda eyes. Lately, I've been suffering from some mysterious malaise. Apart from the insomnia, I experienced symptoms of fatigue, lack of appetite and, strangely, some unexplainable weight gain. It wasn't, however, until my hair started falling out in clumps that I decided to drop by the school clinic.

Miss Mabery gave me some vitamins and suggested the use of a milder shampoo. She even recommended some expensive moisturizer for my dry, flaking skin. There was no way that I could afford a bottle of that stuff. I had long suspected that the school nurse's most outstanding, and perhaps her only qualification, for the job was her clinically white smile and the manner in which her breasts pushed, alert and attentive, against her tight uniform. Both Tara and I thought that it was criminal to let her walk about in a school filled with pre and post-pubescent girls. As if catching the boys' attention wasn't hard enough. We therefore concluded that Miss Mabery was sent there to make certain that high school indeed became the living hell that it was meant to be, particularly for girls like me.

"Out of the way, hobbit."

I looked up to see Margaux Mistral's flawless face and modelesque frame towering above me. I moved aside but still that didn't stop her from bumping against me. There was a chorus of giggles from Margaux's minions as my glasses clattered onto the floor. One of them scoffed at the newsboy cap that I was wearing. I started adding an assortment of hats to my wardrobe in order to conceal the minute bald patches on my scalp. I was shorter than the average 9th grader. I thought it was probably due to my half-Asian ancestry though I had never met my mother. My father refused to talk about her. I didn't know anything about her except that she committed suicide when I was a baby.

Margaux Mistral was everything that I was not. She was tall, beautiful, popular… Okay, so maybe I was smarter than her, but she was dating a senior. Not just any senior. She was dating Ash Akerman. I hated her. I hated that my life seemed like a stupid teenage television series with all the stupid stereotypes and none of the magical endings where the shy girl gets a makeover and the guy falls in-love with her and the bitchy villain gets her utterly humiliating come-uppance. Well, at least I had Tara, my

BFF. Ours was an enduring sandbox love. Though it hurt me to admit I hadn't been completely honest with her.

It wasn't just the loss of sleep and hair and appetite that was bothering me. My skin also seemed to be… shedding. Every morning, I'd find huge flakes of papery flesh on my sheets. I spent extra minutes in the shower scrubbing off the dead skin cells and moisturizing as best as I can even as pieces of molten skin got stuck to my fingers. I didn't bother telling my dad. His mind was too preoccupied with work and paying the bills. Besides, bodily changes were hardly matters that I wished to discuss with my father. He tried to talk to me once about my period and tampons and stuff. Fail. I love him to pieces but as much as I was freaking out, I was determined to spare the both of us from all that awkwardness.

I didn't dislike all the changes. The weight gain wasn't so bad. In fact, I seemed to look better with a little meat on me. Soon, I noticed that my body was filling out in all the right places. I realized, much to my satisfaction, that I had grown a pair of breasts. Yay! Maybe they weren't Miss Mabery boobies but for the first time in my life, I actually had a cleavage. My hips also seemed rounder, my butt slightly bigger. My skin continued to self-exfoliate and soon, my complexion began to clear up. Silky strands grew rapidly from the bald spots on my scalp, replacing the rioting raven hair.

I convinced myself that I was simply a late bloomer and that I was finally growing up but that did not explain my suddenly perfect vision that forced me to ditch my eyeglasses. As thrilled as I was that I was suddenly turning a few heads, I couldn't help but suspect that something was very, very wrong.

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Maybe it was hormones. Maybe God, or guardian angels, or fairy godmothers were real. Maybe I had unleashed some dormant teenage superpower. Maybe I simply hadn't been aware of my true potentials. Whatever the reason, I went almost overnight from total loser to one of the most popular girls in school.

My movements seemed more confident, my posture more graceful, my reflexes quicker. I was never the athletic type but my body was ten times more agile than before. My senses were stronger, my memory highly
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improved. I turned from good student to stellar pupil with no extra effort. Like a sponge, I absorbed every lesson, every book and every conversation down to the tiniest, most tedious detail. I became more active in extra-curricular projects and was acing all of my papers. I had no idea where I got the energy from. I could feel the power like gasoline stored inside my stomach, constantly refilling itself. I felt almost invincible.

Something else was changing... something inside me. I seemed more driven, more daring, more likely to say and do things that I would've never done before. I was never the impulsive type and was used to my instincts failing me about 97% of the time but somewhere along the way, I started giving in to previously stifled urges and random ideas and in the process, learned to stop doubting myself. When I tried out for the cheerleading team, I totally killed it. Since it was gradually becoming obvious to everyone that *the new girl* was better than her, it was only proper for Margaux to invite me into her circle. To be honest, they terrified me—those girls with their designer handbags and acid tongues, but at the same time, it was everything that I had ever wanted. Except, of course, that that meant I had to stop hanging out with Tara.

It wasn't like I ditched her for them or anything. She made the choice for me. She was being so uncool about the whole Margaux thing. She said that Margaux made her feel uncomfortable, that she couldn't be trusted and that I should stop acting like life is a lame, predictable teenage T.V. series with a happy ending because it's not. I told her: "Duh. Margaux makes everyone uncomfortable." I told her to stop being such a hater, that I wasn't stupid and it's not like I really trusted Margaux and that if she really was my best friend, she'd be happy for me. Tara was jealous, obvi. She was being so unfair. Then just like that, she stopped replying to my texts. So I quit bothering her. Hashtag WHATEVER.

My breakup with Tara hurt me more than I dared to admit to myself or to my dad. However, there was one particular breakup that really made my summer. Margaux broke up with Ash Akerman. Or was it the other way around? Anyway, it didn't really matter because Ash asked me out. *Oh. My. Effin' God.* Even then, all I could think of was how I wished that Tara was there to help me choose my outfit and fix my hair and just… be there for me.

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Something happened that night that changed my life forever. We went to see a movie and then Ash took me to Fat Bob's for burgers. We split the bill. He talked about himself most of the time and I listened raptly with doglike admiration. By the end of the night, I found myself hoping that relationships could thrive on swag alone.

There we were in his car, parked in some deserted place. He leaned over to kiss me and I felt my heart become inflated with proportionate amounts of desire and fear. It was my first kiss. He was gentle at first, his tongue both tentative and teasing. I wasn't aware of the hand that had been sliding up my spine until I felt the faint snap of my suddenly unhooked bra.

"No," I whispered, recoiling instinctively.

If he heard, he gave no indication. His kisses became rougher. His hands crept beneath my shirt to pinch my nipples and squeeze my breasts. I could feel his hard-on pressing against me.

"No," I repeated, pushing him away more forcefully.

"Fucking tease," he rasped, his handsome features contorted with fury. Then just as quickly, his face melted into its usual cool countenance. "You better put out, Chloe," he coaxed, his voice dripping with malice. "Because if you don't, I'll tell everyone what a real slut you are. I'll tell everyone that there's something wrong with your cunt. Everyone will remember you as the freak with the smelly snatch. Then I'll tell everyone how I turned you down."

He let out a harsh chuckle. His breath was hot against my face. It reeked of Fat Bob's chili burgers and onion rings. In an instant, all of my expectations left me like helium exploding out of a punctured balloon. It was the most ridiculous threat that I've ever heard but I had a feeling that it had worked for him before. At that moment, my entire body was paralyzed with fear.

"I'll be gentle. Promise," he said. His mouth covered my trembling lips as he pulled down his pants.

I felt the bile rise in my throat—bitter, burning and inevitable. I was so nervous that I vomited into his mouth.

"What the fu…" he gurgled as he pulled away. Then his eyes grew wide, so wide that I thought his entire head would explode. It didn't. Instead, Ash fell to his knees, clutching his stomach, his face twisted in a terrible grimace. He appeared to be in an enormous amount of pain. Then he

reached between his thighs. When his hand came away, his shaking fingers were all bloody and covered with slimy pulped flesh. I watched, my fear magnifying with each second, as blood and what I assumed to be his liquefied entrails swirled down his legs.

I struggled to get the door open and got out of the car. I was only vaguely aware of the sharp ripping sound that my skirt made as Ash desperately clung to it. I backed away, slowly, unable to tear my gaze away from the nightmarish scene. He crawled towards me, dragging his body out of the car and into the pavement. As he did, I saw more of his melted innards trickling out of his butthole. His face, his body, they appeared to be shrinking in front of me until he looked less and less like Ash Akerman and more and more like an animated corpse. He tried to scream, his mouth a black bottomless pit on his emaciated face, but no sound came out of the tongueless cavity. So I opened my mouth and screamed for the both of us.

At that moment I was nothing but a screaming bundle of nerves. My brain exploded within my skull like a miniature Hiroshima. I felt myself swelling and swelling, expanding until the exhausted fibers of my skin started snapping. I felt myself unraveling, one fiber at a time. I was no longer me. I was nothing but loosely connected ganglia-- dividing, multiplying, scattering. Then I was everywhere-- hundreds and thousands of little Chloes—crazed, curious, creeping through the pavement then cutting pathways through Ash's flesh.

I entered his body through every cavity, an entire colony of me, all conscious and crawling and throbbing with life. I was beneath his skin, burrowing, breathing… I was inside him, plumping his body, filling him up the way chaff and sawdust fills a mummified corpse. It was like an orgy of me taking place inside a sarcophagus of his hollow, lifeless body. Then every tiny crawling Chloe—every fine furry limb, every one of my thousands of pinhead eyes— exploded in ecstasy.

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A few days later, the police came to ask some questions. I told them that Ash and I went to see a movie together and then we had dinner afterwards. I told them of how he had ended the date abruptly when I refused to put out. They seemed satisfied with my story, even nodding sympathetically from time to time. They were certain that his disappearance had something to do
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with the ample amounts of a new street drug that they had discovered inside his room.

My days as a popular girl had been short-lived. I became quiet and withdrawn. I stopped answering calls and attending parties. I realized that I couldn't care less about what others thought of me. Not while there were too many weird things happening. I remembered walking home that night, limping and a bit disoriented, having no idea at all what happened to Ash's corpse. I was still pretty shaken about what happened but apart from the shock and confusion, there was something else too.

I became aware of every single cell in my body. My skin was constantly itching. I could feel phantom spiders crawling just underneath the pruritic flesh, threatening to break free, like gelled pus boiling beneath a zit that's about to pop. I could feel them frolicking inside my skull, their miniscule bodies hissing in a sustained susurrus as they writhed and rubbed against each other.

Tara started talking to me again, telling me that she was worried. I stayed away. I couldn't tell her the truth. It was never my intention to hurt anyone and though I would never dare hurt Tara, at that moment, I just couldn't trust myself.

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I found the letter one night while I was leafing through one of the old baby albums father had kept hidden inside the cellar. I went down there in an attempt to forget about the present, to momentarily dwell in the uncomplicated past. The paper was creased and yellowed, frayed at the edges. Inkblots and stained fingerprints peppered the page as though someone had read and re-read the note, wetting the fragile paper with briny beads of sweat or tears. My heart hammered against my ribcage like a moth's wings beating against its glass prison. Somehow, I knew that the letter was from my mother. The indecipherable message was hand-written in Japanese so I went online to find a way to translate it. The rough translation was:

I was a spider who wanted to become human. I have lived 400 years to acquire this form. Above all things, I wanted love. I waited again for 100 years to find it. Now I can rest at last. Thank you, my love.
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A few more online searches led me to the Jorōgumo, also known as the “whore spider”. According to Japanese folklore, when a rare spider lives up to 400 years old, it acquires deific powers and may take the form of a human. Most Jorōgumo assume the shape of a lovely woman skilled in playing the *biwa*. They would seduce men with their music and their charms and then devour them for sustenance. There were tales about Jorōgumo who fell in love with mortal men and mortal men who fell in love with them, despite knowing their true nature. There was also one about an exorcism done by a Buddhist priest to cast the evil spider spirit away from a young man whom the binding spider bride had ensorcelled. There were ancient paintings depicting the prostitute spider as a creature with a woman’s face and torso and a giant arachnid’s opisthosoma, spinnerets and eight limbs. Some regard the Jorōgumo as a demon; some call it an evil spirit, while there are some who consider the half-woman, half-spider creature as a protecting deity.

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I found him in his study, engrossed in paperwork. I dropped my mother’s suicide note on his desk. My father’s face darkened.

“Where did you get this?” he asked, but the question was futile. He grabbed the piece of paper and shoved it inside the drawer. “Chloe, sweetheart, what’s past is pas--”

“I killed him.” The words were like speeding bullets-- deadly, irreversible-- shooting out of my mouth and boring holes into my father’s heart. “Daddy, I killed Ash.”

For a moment, he was speechless, his face blanched white in terror. Terror of what? Me? I couldn’t bear the thought.

“Daddy,” I sobbed. “Who am I?”

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Demon, evil spirit, or protecting deity… It was entirely up to me which one I was going to be. Mother was a demon because that’s what she chose to become. She was a murderess, a whore, a cannibalistic beast, wearing women’s bodies like flesh suits and selling her love to men who would later

fill her belly. She did all of these things with no other purpose than to sustain her youth and beauty. She took lives until she could no longer do it.

Perhaps the worst of all her faults was that she was a terrible mother. She fell in love with my father and couldn't handle it. She spared his life so that she could pass her egg sac to him and then flung herself into her watery grave in what she thought was a noble act of sacrifice. She'd rather die than change. She preferred to drown than to face a life that was other than she had always known. My mother didn't know anything about sacrifice. She mutilated my father then left him alone to raise me. She understood nothing about responsibility. Daddy did and his first act of love for me was to adopt and sacrifice an infant so that I might have a body to dwell in-- a single human body to contain all of me.

Demon, evil spirit, or protecting deity… I knew which one I was meant to be. I watched the Spiderman movie over and over and the words became a mantra to me: *With great power comes great responsibility.* Okay, so perhaps Hugo Voltaire may have said it first, but I liked to believe that the film was speaking to me. And while I may not be the ideal teenage superhero, well, at least I was doing part in making the world a better place.

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Brad Patterson took me out on a romantic picnic dinner by the lake. The moonlight cast ghostly reflections on the water, making the surface shimmer like silver spider webs. He leaned over. Panicked spasms stirred inside my gut. I closed my eyes and my lips parted as his mouth hovered just above mine. I held my breath for what felt like the longest time until my lungs were aching, begging to collapse. Then with a sudden stroke of boldness, I rose to meet his lips.

My timidity gradually abandoned my body and in its place formed a red wall of hatred. I could feel the impressive dinner that we had rising up my throat-- lobster, salad, chocolate truffles, expensive wine. He even bought me flowers. How could he not? He made loads of money selling packets of the new street drug to kids in school. A certain part of me believed in the honesty of his feelings for me. Still, I had a grave responsibility.

He pulled away and for a while, the startled expression on his face mirrored mine. He tried to say something, his staccato speech choking itself
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out of his mouth as my venom trickled down the back of his throat. Then, like a sex-starved maniac, I unbuckled his belt then pulled down his pants. This time, I knew better than to just stand back and watch in horror.

I crawled towards him, my proboscis-like tongue unraveling. The stars leered like a constellation of voyeuristic eyes as they watched me make love to his body. I sucked his liquefied innards from his anal orifice, slurping every ounce of his yolky goodness until he was nothing but an empty eggshell of a man. Soon, the human Chloe crumbled and the picnic blanket was covered by thousands of tiny Chloes… clambering clots of flesh-- eight-legged and many-eyed-- crawling inside the orbits of Brad's sunken eyes, entering his ears, his nostrils, creating new orifices until his body was bursting with me.

I lingered inside him for a little while, basking in post-orgasmic afterglow, a bit reluctant to let go. Suddenly, I understood my mother, understood the addictive sensations of feeding on another person's vigor. At that moment, I knew that the whole superhero thing was merely an excuse and that even without the just cause that I had so valiantly thrust upon myself, I would still be doing this if only for the sheer pleasure it brought.

Even then I knew what I was-- a myriad of thinly veiled monstrosities, ancient and hungry, hiding inside a teenager's body. I was a Jorōgumo's daughter, an egg sac passed from body to body throughout the centuries. My body was nothing but a haunted vessel and peering from behind the lenses of my eyes were thousands of baby spiders, each of them waiting for their 400th birthday… waiting to break free.

ACT OF GOD

L.L. Hill

Esther's SUV coasted to a stop at the start of low peninsula finger that pointed between a deep inner bay and the cup of an outer bay. A toy laker aimed at the St. Lawrence Seaway. White cloud castles bloomed over the lake in the August humidity.

"Is this the spot?" she asked her passenger, Gordon Jones.

He raised a large hand from his thigh, each fingertip swollen by raised nail beds to point to the outer bay.

"There's a wreck, an old fiber form and you can see a cow's body, tucked in like."

Esther raised a finger to her chin and watched a seagull hover before she inhaled and expelled her response. "Mr. Jones, your claim stated that you lost three cows to a 'wild animal.' What wild animal in Ontario stores its kill in the water? And where are the other two cows?" Brown eyes glittered under black curls.

"I dunno where the other cows is an' I might know how a spider got to be so big, but a spider is a wil' animal and m' policy covers it." As he stabbed a finger for emphasis, his grey cap almost slipped off.

His pale blue eyes shifted away and she stared at his ruddy and wrinkled profile.

"Mr. Jones, your family has had this farm for over a century?"

"Closer to two, Ms. Green and none of 'em had their Jerseys ate by a spider."

"And you mentioned 'earthquakes' as a peril covered in your policy?" Her thumbs and fingers touched over her knees as she exhaled slowly.

"Yes." Red flushed over his neck.

"So, your claim of three dead cows, only one visible body, is based on the perils of 'wild animals' as spiders and 'earthquakes,' one of which has not been recorded in the last week in Ontario."

"That would be the nutshell, Ms. Green," he said great fingers spread wide. "Now all that you're missin' is the kernel," he said to two clenched fists.

“Okay, where should I look to crack the nut open, Mr. Jones?”

Esther watched the slow rise and fall of Gordon Jones’ chest in the side mirror. It was a good thing that her manager had reminded her that thirty years ago the man next to her had left university halfway to being a vet when his parents had died. His clothes looked nearly that old. Not one frivolous claim had been filed by the stoic farmer. And two years ago a Toronto farm had lost stock to funnel web spiders.

“I thought you’d bring a dive team.”

“You said it was in shallow water. I have the technology.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I bet you do.” He carefully inserted one finger into the door release and opened it. “I’ll show you the one.”

“Right.”

Esther slipped out as his weight rocked the SUV. The moist air was pungent with urea though the nearest cows were clustered together near the gate. Their fear carried in lowing that was dark miasma above the field. Wool bales stacking in the sky promised a thunderstorm.

She followed him a short distance across the grazed field, noting the fences that ended at the shore while stepping carefully around crusted pies. They stood, shoulders together, on the tip of the finger that crouched like a cat lapping over placid blue water.

“There’s no fence.”

“Cows don’ graze on sand.” Air blew out from curled lips.

In her notebook she wrote that. “Was that dredged?” She pointed at the inner harbor with a dock as grey as the exposed limestone rock at the verge of grass and sand.

“Yeah. Years back. Coupla’ old wrecks from the loggin’ days somewhere. Longshore current filled the outer bay. Used to be a sawmill too.” His hands were spread in his large coverall pockets.

“And that’s the fiber form,” she said pointing with her chin as she pivoted.

Stern to shore, water roiled around the submerged cabin as if unsure what to do with a partially digested meal. Esther gasped and leaned forward as if she could bring a black and white ball in a silver bag tucked in a corner of the cabin into clearer focus. One leg washed in the surge.

“That’s the heifer. Watch a little.”

“Mr. Jones, if it’s a spider, how does it breathe?”

“Some critters take air with ‘em. This ‘un put the heifer in the air bubble and munches when it wants.”

Esther pulled her phone out, noted that this was a ‘No Signal” area and clicked off a couple of still pictures. She side stepped, looking for light angling into the cabin. A dark brown abdomen coated in gossamer silver thrust through the surface and disappeared, long limbs wriggling.

“Was that a seal?”

“In fresh water? With legs?” His belly heaved.

“Okay, that creature was as big as or bigger than a seal. Spiders can span a spread palm. So what’s this, Mr. Jones?” White teeth gleamed and eyes sparkled with curiosity.

“It’s easier to think about now you know there’s summat, right?”

“No argument, Mr. Jones. How do you think a giant spider arrived on your beach?”

“Ah, it’s Gordon.” His rubber boots shuffled.

“And Esther.” She smiled and waited.

“Well, I watched ‘em some. They call ‘em ‘diving bell spiders.’ In Europe and Japan they live in ponds and rivers. There was an earthquake in Japan two years ago. They had to shut down the reactors. Heavy water leaked out.”

“And you think that leak caused normal spiders to mutate.”

“Yep.”

“So, how did a spider that mutated in Japan get to Ontario?”

“Hitched. Them lakers carry cargo ‘round the world. Goin’ through the locks they drop ballast water. If ‘ey picked it up near the leak, who knows?”

“Hence the ‘earthquakes’ and ‘wild animals’ as your perils.”

“’Peril’ is better than ‘Act of God.’ Who would want to feel that their loved one had died by God’s wish?”

“A poignant observant, Gordon.”

Moisture boiled from the lake continued to add layers of white and grey wool to the clouds over the lake. A seagull mewed between pecks at a beach treasure.

“Well, I’d better get some gear over to record this.” She began to walk back to her SUV.

“Yer not diving, are ya?”

“No, though I might get my feet wet. The heifer was the last to go missing?”

“Yeah. Missed her yesterday mornin’.”

“And the two cows?”

“First went five days ago, the nex’ three.”

Esther opened her hatch and mused over an inner tube. “Well, it’s probably not safe to assume that there’s only one spider. I seem to recall that they have babies by the hundreds.”

“I’ve only seen the one. No point in makin’ an ass outta you and me. Would be hard to imagine one spider eatin’ three cows.”

“I can imagine the advertisement, ‘Wanted-Giant Spider Wrangler’.”

His belly shook before he said, “I don’ want that. Put the cows off their milk. They’re scared already.”

“They look terrified. May I ask why you don’t move them to another field?”

“Saw the spider first yesterday. Can’t say my other fields are safe. None of them are coming near the water now. I put a water trough out. Too small for the spider.”

“Right. If here’s not safe, why would anywhere be?”

Esther flicked a fly off of her slack’s crease with a trim fingernail before lifting the tube and model power boat out of her SUV.

“Can I take somethin’?”

“Yes, you can take the camera,” she said as she walked back to the shoreline ledge. Concentration creased her forehead.

Gordon stood looking for a moment before carefully picking up a camera sealed in a clear plexi-glass case and a web of black nylon straps. Stiff legged, he carried his assignment to the limestone step. He bent awkwardly as he slid the camera off of the cradle of his fingers to the grass.

“Looks like you’re tryin’ to catch a spider with one.”

“It does, doesn’t it?”

“Goin’ to be a squall soon.”

“Shouldn’t take long, fifteen, twenty minutes.” She did not look up from her task of attaching the remote boat to tow the tube. The camera webbing she secured in the tube.

“Wonder what a spider would do if it saw a diver?” Gordon asked while scratching under his cap with a drumstick finger.

“Probably ‘Yummy! Dinner delivered!’” quipped Esther, glad that she had opted for a low budget preliminary investigation.

On the grass verge next to her, the large grey boots shuffled and turned between the bay and lake. He was right, she thought. No diver would get into the water with a spider that had captured and killed three cows. Quandaries and dilemmas made castles in her mind not unlike the stacking clouds over the lake.

Esther stepped across the neck of land. Little dimples had begun to spot the surface and they warped her reflection. It would be really nice to know where the other two cows were, she thought.

“Wonder where the other two cows are. So hard to see when light hits the water like this.” Oblivious to his echo of her thoughts, Gordon pulled at grey spikes that sprang from beneath his cap before shoving them back under.

“I think I’ll put this in the water a few meters downs the shore. As cows don’t swim, it should be assumed that they were taken at the water’s edge while drinking.”

“Would they know that a camera and inner tube’s not edible?” A corner of Gordon’s thin lips lifted in a smile.

“I hope that they regard two-legged animals as inedible.”

“Maybe we should wear silk and confuse ‘em.”

“Wrap ourselves in cocoons as if a bigger spider already claimed us.”

“Wish we ‘ad a pheromone of some sort. I wonder how they communicate in the water? Do you think they use sound or chemicals?”

“If no one knows through studying the little ones, perhaps some PhD candidate will volunteer to study the big ones.”

“I don’ wan’ ‘em near my cows. Maybe catch them and put them in a swimming pool.”

“I think that the only way anyone is studying these is zapped and strapped to a table. If the venom of a little spider can kill an adult, what would the venom of this giant do?”

“Should we call someone to tell ‘em?”

“No service and the squall will be here if we leave the shore. Seeing is believing.”

Gordon’s belly heaved silently again. “You don’t think ‘earthquakes’ and ‘wild animals’ would work again?”

“I think that even a frame of clear picture will establish legally the Act of God on your lake front.” A gust punched the words away from Esther’s mouth.

“Do you need a hand?” Gordon asked as Esther began to pick up the float, boat and camera.

“You can make sure that the lines don’t catch on anything,” she answered before taking quick steps down the shore to a point ten meters away.

Stiff, bending over straight legs, Gordon freed a snagged line before lumbering over to join her.

“Okay, everything’s on-boat, camera-I’ll just put them in.”

She set them in the inquisitive chop that now splashed the shore and stepped back to set in gear the joystick remote box. The tether of camera line uncoiled from the small monitor. Flat rock, sand patches and weed flashed by before the hull of the fiberglass boat appeared.

Esther slowed the unit as it neared the patch of bovine. A blast of wind whistled from the waves and up over the limestone lakefront ledge. Both heads met over the monitor.

“Incredible! Look at those fangs!” exclaimed Esther as she saw forearm length sharp pincers poised under feelers.

“It’s got eight eyes, four on the bottom and four on top.”

“One for each leg? Look at the size of the air bell!”

“That’s Bessie! I can see her ear tag!”

A wall of wind smacked down from spinning black clouds, curling waves under the model boat and tube and flipping them. Propeller blades beat the air in a high-pitched whine before shorting out. Thunder and lightning crashed and rumbled.

“I’ve got it. I can pull it back,” said Esther, concentration setting lines in her face.

“Will the camera get wet?”

“Camera’s waterproof. I just need to get it.”

Three meters from the shadow of the wreck, the boat wedged in a crack. Waves rose over it and pinned it, although Esther tried to move it from side to side and up and down to free it.

“I’ll get it.”

“Gordon, wait! You’re too close!”

A wave broke around his boot as he reached down and pried the model out with a spread of clubbed fingers.

“There. Free now. Pull it back,” he said, turning his back to the spider’s bell. Flagpole straight, he walked back to Esther, a defiant glint in his eyes.

“I couldn’t see any more space for me in the spider’s web,” he said a tone above the rising wind.

“It’s the potential for others that concerns me,” said Esther as she popped open the plexi-glass cover and transferred the SD card to a pocket of her slacks.

“It didn’t look like a mutant. Just big,” he muttered to the wind.

“Let’s get out of here, Gordon,” she said and stopped, transfixed by the horror and awe that chased over his face.

Her boots rasped on gravel as she spun, prickles of terror spread like a virulent rash over her. Two giant spiders watched from the grass pasture above. A stray gold spear thrown by the sun accentuated the black hair that coated their bodies. Facets of their eyes glittered indigo and purple as they shifted their weight in the wind.

“Run!” barked Gordon as he pushed and pulled Esther down the shore.

Lightning flickered and thunder cracked. Esther screamed as her skin tingle. She was bowed between Gordon’s hands holding her front and back. A horrible stench of burning hair and flesh stung her nostrils.

She watched a drop of blood spatter on a rock and then be washed away by a wave as Gordon carried and dragged her down the shore away from the spiders.

“Up here!”

She burbled an incoherent question.

“They’re gone.” Grass slid under her boots. “Sit in your car,” he ordered as he lifted her legs into the passenger seat.

In the mirror before he closed the door she saw the hulks of the two arachnids smoking on burned grass.

“Lightning,” she muttered as Gordon drove them away.

BEWITCHED BY THE WEB

Shannon Hollinger

If you had told Ethan Taylor that that the beginning of the end would start with ants, he would have laughed in your face. In a world with nuclear weapons and suicide bombers, on a continent overrun with crocodiles and other deadly reptiles, a trail of ants doesn't hold much weight. But that's exactly how it began, with a long, weaving trail of ants marching their way into Ethan's bathroom through a crack in the tile.

He'd had to deal with some frisky little sugar ants racing around his kitchen before, but these were different. These were red ants, the kind that are always on a mission and would bite the hell out of you if given a chance. Ethan hated the little buggers, so he wasn't too upset when the spiders followed. It's only natural for a spider to follow its prey and of all indoor bugs (and spiders aren't technically bugs, are they?) he preferred spiders. They're unobtrusive, seeming rather content to choose a corner for their web and stay there, waiting for their next meal.

Ethan didn't really notice the spiders at first, just some hasty glances away from the gathering cobwebs that he didn't feel like cleaning up. After a few weeks, though, he began to take an interest. He started noticing their different sizes, shapes and colors, peering at them curiously as a way to pass time while he brushed his teeth. From the compact to the willowy, Ethan became acquainted with them all. Soon, Ethan was surprised to realize that he had favorites. He had a particular affection for one, a handsome black fellow, shinier than the rest, who had made himself a tunnel-like web in the upper left hand corner of the window.

It became his habit to watch them, not just while brushing his teeth, but while in the tub, on the toilet and even an appraising look around whenever he found an excuse to duck in and grab something. Ethan grew to know their habits and mannerisms, their individual personalities. He knew that they were comfortable with him. How many people can say that they've seen a spider cling to a wall upside down, push their rear end out and excrete clear drops of liquid onto the ground? Not many, or more

people would think twice before assuming that their clean floor wasn't, in fact, a spider toilet.

By this time, the ant population had been annihilated. Any new trespassers were dispatched as quickly as they appeared. Ethan's spiders were in want of a real meal. Afraid that they might leave, he began leaving the window cracked with the light on, only you can't predict the path a moth or fly will take. Too many managed to escape the bathroom and intrude upon the rest of the house, which was just annoying. So Ethan caught the bugs himself and fed them to the spiders, alternating who got fed on which day. After the involved parties got used to it, it didn't take long for Ethan to catch an insect, place it carefully in a pair of tweezers and hold it close enough for the spiders to dart out from their webs and grab their meal.

This introduced an all new behavior. When one spider had a choice victim in his grasp, the others would start vibrating and stomping one little foot up and down repeatedly. Were they clapping? Ethan saw his spiders as a small community of gladiators, cheering for their comrades' victories. This is when he realized that his spiders were communicating with each other, but how? Despite the hours he spent watching them, Ethan worried that he would never know for sure. Finally, he decided he'd just have to discover his own way to talk with them.

It was around this time that Ethan became obsessed with wanting to touch them. He wanted to know what they felt like. Furry? Smooth? Prickly? He had to know. He began with a small one who jumped and ran when he touched it, hiding for the next day. But he was too small; Ethan couldn't feel any texture on such a tiny body. So he went up a size. Again, a hop, a retreat and a twenty-four hour hide, still without the desired results.

Gathering his guts, Ethan touched big handsome himself. There was a small bounce, but no running and hiding. Instead, the spider turned in the direction the touch had come from. Interesting. Ethan stopped his experiment for the day, but his thoughts kept leading back to new questions. What would happen if he did it again, maybe many times in a row? Would the spider learn to be petted, tolerate it, maybe even like it?

The next night Ethan got his chance. His electricity had been blown out by the strongest cyclone to hit Australia in decades. He couldn't concentrate on the book he was trying to read with the wind shrieking loudly as it tore at his house, not to mention his nerves. That's when he

thought of his spiders. They always had such a calming effect on him, why not now?

Ethan placed a few candles around the bathroom. The spiders were more comfortable, bolder in the soft flickering glow than they were in the harsh electric lights he usually used. Standing in front of his favorite, he took a deep breath and steadied his trembling hand. He reached, tentatively as first and then in one smooth, fluid motion, he closed the distance and touched the spider.

The spider turned so quickly that Ethan didn't even process the movement until he felt the pain of the fangs in his flesh. He was so shocked that he didn't react at first, just stared at the spider as the acidic venom spread through his throbbing hand. He became aware of the other spiders advancing, stomping their little feet in a warrior's dance of victory, the tattoo of their march pounding against his eardrums. Or was that the rush of the blood leaving his head? He never felt the floor rise up to meet him as his vision faded to black.

SCREAMING, MASTICATION AND DEATH

Joseph J. Patchen

Screaming awoke me. That and the sound of flesh being torn from a body and chewed; sounds that were soon all quickly replaced by another – a long wet sucking sound.

That's what jarred me, brought me back from the netherworld and keeps me awake at this moment; noises that are as clear and close as the darkness that envelops me.

Such are the sounds, almost ritualistic, that wake me almost every night and startle the routine of my days; visceral sounds that comprise an almost calculated collection of auditory intrusions that sporadically yet continuously loop and loop, all ending in screaming, mastication and death.

I never see the actual attack or witness the feeding. I never catch of glimpse of 'it'. I never see the beast scurry away. But I can hear it "click". I can hear those eight legs ending in what must be talons tap, tap and tapping as it walks away.

I can only find the remains of the predation suspended in 'its' web. Broken pieces of other species, lured, trapped and destroyed much like the mice and rats that have been littering my yard and doorsteps these past few weeks; all the same, in pieces, exsanguinated, rubbery, hard and flat.

We've only lived here a month, but in these past few weeks 'it' has become more evident, daring and efficient, more prolific and brutal. No matter what steps I contrive, I can't find 'it', let alone exterminate it.

My wife's unending pleas for us to leave eventually did end. She was always smarter than me. But I did as I always did when confronted, just buried my head and lived in denial. Such remains as the root cause of her death.

She understood the evil. She had seen it on more than one occasion; hairy, thorny and large.

At first I concluded she was nipping during the day, but as the carnage multiplied…

Professionals were brought in, but each in turn left without so much as an explanation, all refusing payment. Even my parish priest refused to

bless this house. Father Conlon told me told me I should burn it to the ground.

I had secretly hoped that ‘it’ would simply go away. I prayed each day it would. Such is the reason my bride is gone and I remain. I completely miscalculated, treating the entity only as a simple insect and not what it truly is or represents. Death pervades this place because of ‘it’ and whoever happens to cross its path enters into a struggle over who will be the master.

Evil lets you know when it’s around. Stakes to ‘its’ claim are littered throughout this house, floor to ceiling and wall to wall, the webs mockingly dancing at every turn.

But turn I can no longer do. I refuse to run. I refuse to give ‘it’ all I have worked for since it has taken so much already and I tell ‘it’ so in nervously conceived soliloquys as I go about my daily routine. I ignore the webs and as well as the carcasses, leaving them to rot or fade away in the sunlight; letting ‘it’ see I am neither afraid nor impressed by ‘its’ accomplishments.

So we are now in the same room at the same time. We are now within feet of each other in an ever compressing darkness. I can see ‘its’ eyes; red and large slowly sizing me up. I can feel its energy, cold and dark, trying to sap me just as it swallows anything with life.

There is no clicking. There is no retreat. ‘It’ wishes to end this now and I am relieved with that choice. To that end I too am prepared. Since my wife’s passing I have slept with a pistol under my pillow waiting for ‘it’ to strike.

Slowly I lift my right hand, pointing my index finger in its direction. I am actually measuring ‘it’, but I play this moment as if I am scolding it in a voice reminiscent of a Saturday night D horror movie. “This bloodshed has to end,” I tell it. “You have to leave this place so I can find peace. In the name of all that is holy, return to Hell!”

My voice echoes. I know it hears me. I do smirk at the words I utter and am surprised ‘it’ did not laugh at me.

There’s no formal answer other than a few fast ‘clicks’ as it appears to position itself to launch an attack. Meanwhile my left hand has reached around my back, so I can retrieve my weapon. My grip tightens around it and I begin to stroke the trigger, surprisingly I’m not sweating. I sense the kill, probably in the same way ‘it’ does.

The room is getting colder and the standoff tenser. In my mind I count to three over and over. It looks at me, not moving a muscle. My courage is waning so I have no choice but close my eyes, twist my body and fire.

Smoke, glass, wood and plaster explode into one. There is a scream, actually more like a shriek. I'm not sure if it is pain or fear. I am not sure if it's really me or 'it'.

But I do know that I end up on my stomach, on the floor, covered in debris dry and wet. I'm scratched, sore and I've even wet myself. Once I have my bearings, I stand and switch on a light.

I don't know how many times I pulled the trigger but I do know there are a few shots left. Those are the rounds I empty into the carcass lying on its back some five feet in front of me.

The spider is larger than I thought, akin to that of a small dog. It is black, brown and red. Its legs are sticking straight out, twitching and its body oozing a bright yellow substance.

It's over. Now I sweat. I chuckle at first and then begin to cry. It is over. Peace can now reign over this place and my mind can now be at ease. As I walk back across the room I notice again that the body of the monster is somewhat smaller now.

Maybe it's perception, maybe it's shrunk; but it appears to be smaller, about the size of a nectarine. The pool of ooze that leaks from its wounds now expands outward like a dark aura as it soaks into the rug.

I grasp the hand of my beloved as she sits in a chair next to my bed. I hold her hand tightly as I am overcome by emotion. Her flesh is cold, hard and rubbery. For a short instant though I can feel a sliver of warmth confirming to me her happiness, confirming to me that she knows we have finally won and confirming to me that she is finally at rest.

PRECIOUS AMBER

Terry Alexander

“You’re sure it’s amber?” The older woman put her feet gingerly on the slick clay. The constant mist had increased the fall danger.

“Yes, Miss King,” the young man said. “That’s what grandpa said. Said it was the biggest chunk of amber he’d ever seen.”

She licked her lips anxiously. “I worked with your father on the amber digs here in ninety-six. We thought we found it all. How’s Ray these days?”

“Dad died in a car wreck in ninety-nine. I’ve been with Grandpa ever since. He said there’s plenty more amber locked in the clay. You just have to be willing to dig for it.” He pulled a hanky from his pocket and wiped at his runny nose. “Still, I wish we had better weather. I’d love to see a nice warm day.”

A large figure, wearing heavy coveralls, appeared from the clay bank. “Not likely, Chet. According to the radio, we’ve got a major winter storm coming down on us. Sleet, freezing rain and snow, the whole package. Could be in for six to eight inches.” His eyes focused on the woman, bundled up against the elements, following his grandson. “Hello, Lindsey, good to see you again. It’s been a long time.”

“Last time was when I moved away from Arkansas. You could have dropped by after I retired and moved back to Malvern.” Lindsey glanced at the gathering dark clouds. “You’re sure this is inclusion amber, Steve?”

“Dropping by didn’t seem like a good idea, the way things ended between us.” The old man changed the subject quickly. “Been around amber all my life and this is the biggest chunk I’ve ever seen. Not positive what’s trapped inside. It looks to be a giant spider, but I’m not certain.”

“A spider?” Lindsey repeated. “This could be a great find.”

He nodded. “I think this will be the greatest amber find in Arkansas. It’s covered with mineral deposits and I can’t make out a lot of details. Come and look for yourself.” Steve turned and made his way to a huge tarp covered excavation carved into the clay. “I found small chunks of amber at first, all of it in this small area. I kept digging deeper and deeper. Came

across a large block yesterday." He lifted the tarp from the opening. "Take care where you put your feet. It's slick as ice."

Lindsey nodded. She pulled a small flashlight from the large pocket on her coat and ducked inside. Her hiking boots sank into the slimy muck of the tunnel. She flicked on the light and was amazed at the timbers lining the walls and ceiling. She pointed the light down the tunnel. The darkness swallowed it up after ten feet.

"Use one of these." Steve appeared behind her. He lifted a large mag light from a wooden shelf attached to the wall. "You need to see where you're going."

"How far back does this thing go?"

"Thirty-five, maybe forty feet." He fastened a small rope to his waist.

"What's that for?" Lindsey's eyebrows arched suspiciously. "We can't get lost within forty feet."

"Just in case the tunnel collapses." He played the light around the walls. Water leaked from the cracks and joints in the rough timbers. In several places the clay leeched through the boards. "Chet, hold the rope. If I tug on it twice, get us out with the winch."

"Where's my lifeline?"

"I'll hold onto you until Chet gets us free."

"You certainly know how to woo a girl." She switched on the oversized flashlight and crept down the slick tunnel. The clay sucked at her boots as she moved forward.

"I've found nearly twenty pounds of amber to this point. Most of it had wasps and flies trapped inside." Steve's light played along the walls. "Then I found this big chunk, I don't want to risk moving it until I have photographs and independent verification of the find."

"That's where I come in, right?" Lindsey asked.

"That's where you come in. People will listen to someone with your pedigree."

"Thanks a lot." She shook her head. "Chet's a lot like his father. I wish you'd notified me about his death. I would've attended the funeral."

"Wasn't much of a funeral. Just me and the kid and the funeral director." He panned his light to the floor. "Stick close to the wall. There's a big sinkhole ahead."

"What about Amy, surely she came to his funeral?" Lindsey hugged the wall. The rough wood scraped along her coat.

“You’ve got to be kidding. She couldn’t pull herself away from the drugs long enough to come back to Malvern.” He shrugged. “One of her friends found her a couple of years ago in a seedy apartment in Dallas. She’d overdosed on heroin. The rats had been eating on her for three days, before she was found. It wasn’t a pretty sight.”

“Damn.” Lindsey grimaced. “That’s a hell of a way to go.” Her feet slipped on the clay floor. She fell to her knees, her boots sinking into the murky water. Lindsey fumbled for Steve’s arm.

“Be careful.” He circled her waist and pulled her from the pool. “That hole’s like a bog. The clay gets a hold on you and pulls you down.”

“You’ve been digging under these conditions.” She shook her head and moved beyond the hole. “You’re nuts. This place is a death trap.”

“You’ve been in worse conditions. We’re nearly there.” He smiled. “Once you see the piece of amber you’ll be glad you came.” He played the light down the tunnel. A glint of yellow light reflected to the ceiling.

“Is that it?”

“Yeah, I cleaned off a good portion of it. It’s the largest, most pristine piece of amber I’ve ever seen.” Steve’s hand settled in the small of her back, steadying her gait.

“I’ve never seen one reflect that much light before. It must be an extraordinary piece.” Lindsey edged closer, fascinated by the candle light glow from deep in the amber.

“Hard to believe that it’s only fossilized tree resin. That glow makes it look like it’s alive.”

Lindsey settled on her knees. A low whistle escaped her lips. “You’re right. I’ve never seen a piece this large. It’s got to be close to ten pounds. I can’t imagine how something this size could have escaped detection in the ninety-six excavations.”

“You just passed this area over after the big finds were discovered,” Steve mumbled.

She brushed at the mud and mineral deposits, covering the amber. The minerals crumbled under her hand. “I don’t believe this.” Lindsey moved the flashlight closer. “Look at the size of that spider. It’s larger than a Goliath Birdeater.”

“I know. Biggest damn spider I’ve ever seen.”

She wiped more of the mud away. “That’s odd. I could have sworn I saw one of those legs twitch.”

“What kind of spider is it?”

“Not sure. I’ve never seen anything like it, but then I’m not an expert.” She glanced at the tools scattered around her feet. “Hand me that trowel.”

“Hang on. Let me get a picture.” He pulled a small camera from his pocket, aimed it toward the mass of amber and pressed the red button. Light flooded the tunnel for a brief instant.

“Did you see that? It moved, when you took the picture.” She inhaled a deep breath through her mouth. “The spider moved.”

“You’re imagining things.” The camera flashed a second time.

“No, I’m not.” She licked her lips anxiously. “That spider’s alive.”

“It can’t be. That amber’s thousands of years old.”

“Maybe millions.” Lindsey nodded. “Hurry, hand me that trowel.”

“Be careful with that thing. I don’t want you to damage the amber.” Steve lifted the tool from the wet floor.

“I know what I’m doing.” She snatched the tool from his hand. “I handled the dig in ninety-six. I can handle this.”

“Rita left me because of you.”

“Rita would have left you anyway.” Lindsey picked at the soft clay. “She was looking for an excuse to get out of the marriage. When she found out about us, it just gave her the leverage she needed to get what she wanted.”

“That’s true.” Steve agreed. “I managed to get some property, back though.” He peered over her shoulder. “She disappeared in ninety-nine. No one knows what happened to her.”

“Your family’s had a run of bad luck.” Deep furrows creased Lindsey’s forehead, as she continued to pick away at the surrounding clay. “Amy, Ray and Rita, terrible run of luck.”

“Bad things happened to them after they got acquainted with you.” Steve rubbed at the whisker stubble around his chin. “The entire family’s suffered because of you.”

“Damn, did you see that?” Lindsey flinched. “That damn spider moved again. It crashed into the amber. That chunk’s hollow and that spider’s alive. This is the greatest archaeology find in the past fifty years.” She turned toward Steve, her face flushed with excitement. “We’ve got to get this piece of amber out of here and get it to a lab. I still have some

connections in the scientific community. We can make history with this find. This'll get me on top again."

"You'll never be on top again."

"Steve, I'll share the spotlight with you. I won't crowd you out." She glanced from his face to the spider trapped in the amber. "A find like this could make us rich and at our age we need the security."

"Seems like you told me that in ninety-six and I lost everything." Steve glared at the amber. "How much did Harvard pay you for the specimens? I heard it was nearly five hundred thousand."

"Not even close to that." She shook her head. "I barely made anything out of that deal."

"You're lying. You cost me everything. I lost my wife and son because of you. You got Amy hooked on dope. Every bad thing that happened to my family can be traced back to you." His hands settled on his hips.

"You brought that on yourself when you decided to get in my pants."

"You paraded half naked around me. You let me know that any advances I made would be accepted without question and then you sold me out."

"Of course, I sold you out. You were just too naïve to see it coming."

"Look out, the spider's moving again."

Lindsey's head snapped back toward the piece of amber. The spider was pressed against the inside wall of amber. She felt Steve's rough hands fasten on the back of her neck and her coat. Her face was slammed against the pulsing tree resin before she could resist.

"This is a very special spider. It managed to survive for millions of years inside that bubble, only coming out to feed when the opportunity presented itself," Steve chuckled. "After it feeds, it'll hibernate inside the amber and won't come out for years."

"Steve, what are you doing? Let go of me.! You bastard, let me go!" The hard edges of the amber melted around her face, the spider's hairy legs probed her nose and ears, prying at her eyelids. Pain erupted from the center of her forehead. It felt like a white hot iron had been plunged through the flesh and bone directly into her brain.

"Steve, don't kill me. I've got money. I can give you a hundred grand tomorrow," she yelled.

“I don’t want money, Lindsey,” he chuckled. “When Precious is finished with you, I’m going to let you slip down that sinkhole. Rita’s waiting for you at the bottom.”

OLIVIAN NERVO

Gary Murphy

29th of January, 1969. Olivia Nervo gave birth to a baby boy, her first and last child at the age of 37, as her anxious husband, Shaun, waited outside the room on the Maternity Wing in West Cumberland Hospital in Whitehaven. The hospital lobby was freezing cold and he thought he might catch his death waiting for the important news. Coffee after coffee passed his lips as he anticipated glory. But he was also filled with an acute sense of dread and this dulled his mood.

He was right to dread.

Doctor Finland had broken the news his wife had slipped into a deep sleep through dread of her own and that the baby would probably be delivered sometime within the upcoming twenty minutes or so. Shaun had requested to be present, against Olivia's wishes and strict command, at the birth but Finland had warned against it – this was a tricky procedure to undertake which involved much intricate handiwork and consummate gore. He joked, "You'll never look at your wife's vagina in the same way again!"

Shaun felt sick, anyway.

It was 2am when the rushing about was created. Shaun watched helplessly as nursing staff and specialists ran from room to room to retrieve surgical apparatus and suchlike, shouting and hollering, going backwards and forwards in a state of bewildering frenzy. Shaun merely sat there on his stool, sipping hot coffee, nervous as hell.

It was 2.25am when Shaun rejoiced to hear the sound of his bawling new-born. Finland requested that he follow him into the room. Olivia was awake and layered in sweat, but smiled at her gob-smacked husband as she held the greasy little baby in her arms.

"Ten pounds of joy," Finland confirmed, quite pleased with affairs – and rightly so.

Olivia handed the tiny mite to her visibly nervous husband who stood awkwardly by.

Shaun was justly overwhelmed and, together with Olivia, on the brink of tears. Truly, it was the happiest day of their lives – nothing beat this

euphoria and utter joy – this, the blossom of their love for one another, finally realized right there. They would just have to stand by now and watch the wee fella grow up from little ball of sweetness into teenage sprout and then escape into adulthood and become a man. Yes – definitely a happy and joyous occasion here available to be exploited by all involved.

As Shaun rocked the bundle in his arms, he smiled down at Olivia, who noticed something irregular and bizarre.

"My God, did you just see that?"

Shaun looked at her gravely, "See what, honey?"

"His eyes… the baby's eyes… they glowed blue… like neon blue…"

Shaun knew she needed to sleep after all the hard work.

"No," he said. "Are you sure you're feeling fine? You could do with some shut-eye."

Pleadingly, she looked at him. "I saw it…" she spluttered, then looked to Finland for confirmation. "I know what I saw… I saw bright blue light… like a fucking street sign…"

Dr Finland moved in to take the baby. "It's a tough time for both of you, I know. You need rest, Mrs Nervo, Mr Nervo respectively. Perhaps come back tomorrow after a good night's sleep, when you're refreshed, eh?"

Hesitantly, Shaun handed the little lump over. "Sure," he said and moved closer to kiss his distraught wife, "Will you be okay, Olivia?"

Although still stressed after what she definitely just witnessed, she seemed to suddenly relax in the bed and murmured, "Yes, of course. But I'm sure…" She studied the baby Finland cradled next to his chest and watched as he took it away to tuck up for the night.

Shaun warmed her with a hug and more kisses. "We'll have you fit and well in no time at all. And tomorrow – because you deserve them – I'll bring chocolates in a box."

Grudgingly, she smiled back, "Sleep well, dear."

Shaun said, "He's got his mother's big emerald green eyes," and kissed her once on the forehead lingeringly before finally leaving. "I'm so proud of you, Olivia. You've made me the happiest man in the world tonight. I'll always remember it."

He departed finally and headed off towards the hospital car-parking facility which was nearly always full, not wishing to, but realizing he did indeed need some sleep desperately after his long hours' wait in the hospital

lobby. Yes – tomorrow he would commence fatherhood in earnest. Tonight, it was sweet and lonesome slumber, when nothing mattered at all, except say, full-on slumber.

The same applied for Olivia.

As Dr Finland put the baby down in the cot, he smiled down at the wee mite.

But there was something distinctly and deeply hypnotic about the infant.

Finland stood there staring at it.

Suddenly he felt very scared.

"You're the Devil," he muttered, as his breathing altered and his heart began to pound in his chest like a huge tribal drum, "The spawn of Satan…"

The infant's eyes illuminated a rich neon blue, a vision which contained terrible atrocities down the centuries, blood and horror, torture and death, murder and massacre. Last of all, the eyes had a message for the doctor…

He knew everything he had to do to appease the infant's will. Still frightened, he turned around and walked away from the cot, his face etched with blinding fear for his life and apprehension for what he was about to do.

He entered the swing-doors of the vacant Surgery 13, a grey and dull room with no charm whatsoever but which, if anything, resembled a den of torture. He looked around searching for something in particular – something specialized which would assist his cause. He spotted his trophy and slowly gravitated towards the plastic green desk in the very corner of the surgery – a tray of surgical instruments.

He lifted the tiny scalpel and examined it, marvelling in its glistening subtle beauty and its shiny silver precision-feature – the razor-sharp edge. Historically, the scalpel's blade had butchered many…

"God help my soul…" he said, holding the scalpel out before his face.

No, not the eyes…

It seemed the jugular was the best prominent cutting place to insert the blade as part of his suicide. He rammed it in, then twisted it and jerked it, severing his throat as a wide arc of blood cascaded and spilled from the open gash. His life soon ebbed away from the light - or shade - of day.

In the room a little further along from Surgery 13, the infant Olivian Nervo seemed happy enough as it closed its eyes and focused on sleeping

what remained of the early hours of the morning away. But the baby didn't actually go to sleep.

Whilst his mother slept, a transformation occurred – one Shaun Nervo somehow envisaged and predicted, as he hurriedly returned to the maternity wing of the hospital clutching his service revolver, one he always kept handy in the car glove-compartment.

Olivian had grown eight, hairy, spindly legs - which had sprouted from various points on his tiny body. Overcoming the lip of the cot proved no difficulty for the child and the mite, as a black, deformed arachnid, scurried from the room across the tile floor into the clinically-clean corridor outside, continuing along this corridor on a mission, when he entered the room containing his mother.

It was not long before Olivia awoke to face the clinging creature, the boy-spider which had latched onto her person with legs and a wide, gaping mouth oozing green acidic slime, which prised open with little effort and displayed a hidden set of teeth – and took a chunk out of her face. It happened when she realized the affliction was upon her and she screamed, just as Shaun appeared in the doorway flaunting the revolver, which he pointed and aimed at the monstrosity clutching his wife. The gun blast removed its body from its limbs. The creature, it seemed, was dead – yet so was his beloved wife.

"Son of the Devil…" Shaun muttered, observing the bloody mess on the floor.

However, when a set of eyes in the deformed infant's face seemed to glow a mysterious neon ice-blue, it chilled Shaun to the very core of his being and he was suddenly at a desperate loss. The mite was alive and beaming, regenerating and controlling its father – and Shaun accepted it was his turn to die next.

Lifting the heavy revolver, he placed the barrel between his lips, paused for one last look into the young infant's eyes and then at his wife.

The first shot had galvanized people into action on the maternity wing. The second was a dumb reminder…

When the nurses came running into the blood-soaked room, it was to discover little Olivian on the floor amongst the carnage. Gently, a female nurse picked the boy up and cradled him in her arms. "Poor wee bugger…" she said.

Olivian seemed to smile slightly and hiccup his appreciation.

Yet, for some reason, the boy disliked the lady holding him.
It was just the way of little Nervo.

EIGHT LEGGED PUPPIES

E. W. Farnsworth

Sharon Sanderson, graduate student at Yale, won a prestigious university fellowship for her study of arachnids. Professor Helmut Schnurbart, her dissertation advisor and world-renowned expert in spiders, had highly recommended her for the award and expected her to join him as his research assistant on his summer expedition to Guyana. Unfortunately, the bug-eyed professor, whose nickname on campus was The Spider Man, mysteriously disappeared while gathering habitat information about the puppy-sized spider featured in *Scientific American* Magazine shortly after he and Sharon had discovered it.

Sharon, an intrepid field investigator, was quoted in Yale's *Biology Headnotes* publication: "I expect to follow through with work stipulated in my research award even though my major professor will not accompany me. More to your question, no, I have no fear of spiders. I particularly enjoy researching large arachnids like the live specimen you see here—which mastered the Skinner Box. As the late Professor Schnurbart writes in his magisterial *Our Spiders and Ourselves*, these marvelous survivors have so much to teach us about ourselves."

Sharon had some academic political maneuvering to accomplish before she left for Guyana. First she had to ensure that her fellowship would be paid as agreed irrespective of her professor's disappearance. Second, she had to convince the head of the interdisciplinary biology graduate studies program to lead her dissertation committee. The woman hated Sharon for her brilliance and luck, but she saw benefits in backing a rising star who already had made a name for herself. Third, Sharon had to mollify her date, Andrew, who was writing a dissertation on plasma physics. Whilst inserting live flies from a portcullis trap into one of Sharon's spider enclosures, Andrew said, "While you're away, I suppose you want me to care for your menagerie. I really don't mind you going off again, but I would appreciate you not disappearing or getting yourself killed and eaten in Guyana. Weird things happen in that so-called country, like Jim Jones, for one. I want you back so we can plan our future."

“Andrew, just keep your mind focused on writing your dissertation and don’t overfeed the tarantulas. Our future, as you call it, will have to wait. And the mashed bananas for the fruit flies have to be changed every two weeks.”

Sharon departed two days later. In a scientific tradition that extended back at least four hundred years, she arrived in Jonestown and set out from there with pack animals for the jungle camp first established by Professor Schnurbart over a decade ago. She and her professor had spent five glorious summers together at this base camp sharing everything, including intimacy. Sharon felt that she had become an alter ego for her professor and shared his obsessions to the point that the two completed each other’s thoughts on the fly.

As Sharon unpacked her kit, she noticed that the professor’s possessions were just as he must have left it before his departure into the jungle. She found his notebook on the low shelf above his desk and reviewed his last entries, which Sharon found enigmatical. He wrote, “The puppies are rightly named. Not only are the arachnids the size of small dogs, but they are also the infant or toddler state of the adult spider. I am thinking of calling this spider species ‘The Archer’ because of the small, poisonous spines that the creature can shoot into an intruder or its prey.” In two of the professor’s terrariums were desiccated corpses of the largest specimens of the puppies Sharon had ever seen. They were not the size of puppies but of small dogs. Sharon found a rough-sketch map showing a path from the camp through the greenery to a mountainous area not far away. She knew the place well since in a descending shaft near the mountain was the ledge on which the explorers found their first, live puppy specimen. An arrow and a red circle indicated the location of another area of potential interest with a red exclamation mark next to the circle. Sharon decided to investigate that location at first light. Characteristically, she wrote down her plan for the next day—just in case she did not return. She also wrote, “I believe Professor Schnurbart was exploring the location indicated on the enclosed map for evidence that the mature ‘archer’ arachnid may be far larger than the puppy-sized specimens we described in our co-published papers. Among his collected specimens are two desiccated corpses fully four times as large as the largest we had found alive. By my calculations, their full-grown adult size may be twice or even four times as large as the desiccated corpses.”

The Guyana jungle was a lush, green paradise, particularly lovely in the early morning when the mist rose amidst shafts of sunlight through the layered canopy. In spite of the stifling heat and humidity, Sharon wore heavy jungle clothing with a helmet and netting to protect her face and neck. She had taped her pants and shirt at her wrists and ankles and sprayed herself liberally with insect repellent. In an hour Sharon had made the hike to the area the professor had circled on his map. She spent another hour trying to locate the precise position of his entry point, and she finally found it under a rock overhang behind a tree whose roots had evidently been chopped away so that a human could descend into a passage below. Sharon took off her backpack, gulped down some bottled water, tied a fifty-foot climbing rope around a sturdy root, picked up her torch and rappelled down into the opening, which was barely larger than her frame at first but widened as she dropped. She descended twenty feet almost straight down, and then she found herself on a shelf that opened into an underground cavern laced with heavy webs. On the shelf were dried hulks of generations of arachnids. As she shone her torchlight around the space, she saw a dozen large bulbous objects that appeared to be wrapped in spiders' webs. Sharon drew her knife and opened one of these gently to discover the partly digested remains of a lower primate. She moved from object to object, opening each one and verified the pattern of primate prey among this unusual species of arachnid.

The last of the wrapped objects was larger than the others and Sharon felt a frisson as she cut its webbing to find the remains of her mentor and sometimes lover, Professor Helmut Schnurbart. He did not look peaceful in death. His look of agony was belied with the rictus visible in his clenched dental occlusion where his smiling jaw had been partly digested. Sharon drew a deep breath and snapped pictures with her cell phone camera. She then dictated a message, describing what she had found. She completed her recording with, "the nine food specimens including Professor Schnurbart, appear to have been digested partly by arachnid venom. I find no evidence of live arachnids in this space, but several objects the size of softballs appear to be filled with fertile spiders' eggs, which I have harvested. Some of the dead arachnids are, even in their desiccated form, enormous, fully the size of a young human. I now plan to depart this cavern where dead and un-hatched arachnids are sequestered. I cannot account for the absence of living specimens, but expect they will be scouting nearby. The professor,

usually a careful investigator, must have broken his own protocols to have ended as he did."

Sharon placed the softball-sized egg repositories in a netted sack, took a final look around the cavern to be sure she had noticed everything important and then hauled herself back up the passage to the jungle floor. She thought she heard scuffling in the surroundings, but the jungle was always full of sounds. She smelled the acrid but familiar odor of arachnid so quickly donned her backpack and then hauled herself and her precious cargo up the tree whose roots lay over the entrance to the enclosure. She positioned herself on a giant gnarled bough with a view to the entrance to the cavern.

She did not have long to wait. The jungle floor seemed to come alive with enormous arachnids which clambered down into the cavern, dragging a large, paralyzed primate. One of the spiders tentatively stroked the trunk of the tree, made a circuit of it and then followed its kindred through the entrance. Sharon prepared to climb down from her perch and felt along the bough to aid her descent. She found a knife had been stuck at an angle there. She forced the knife free and held it in her hand. It was the professor's, she was sure. He had done what she was doing now. He had climbed this tree, and somehow he had ended in the cavern below.

Sharon shuddered, but steeled herself for her descent and return to the camp. She thought there still might be enough light to get her halfway, at least, if she ran fast enough. As she climbed down, she saw no activity on the ground, but the familiar feel of spider's legs brushed the hand that held the knife. Instinctively from fright, Sharon flicked her wrist and a large puppy arachnid fell to the ground and scurried into the enclosure. Sharon dropped to the ground and ran. While she ran, she pulled out her torch and shined it ahead and behind. The darkness was coming very fast now, but she saw her way was clear and nothing seemed to be following her. She did not pause to catch her breath, but ran until she thought her sides would burst from the exertion.

Sharon managed to pull a water bottle out of her backpack and drank from it while she moved. Her torch showed a puppy spider in her path and she kicked it away. Then she saw another drop ahead of her and she kicked that aside as well. She shone the torch behind her. The path was filling up with spiders that had flowed together in a stream that followed her, some

jumping ahead of the others and scuttling faster than she had ever seen the creatures run.

A puppy dropped from the canopy on her arm and clung there. Ordinarily Sharon would have tried to capture such a perfect, living specimen, but in the nearly dark forest, she sliced at the arachnid with her knife and cut its body from its clinging legs. She clambered down the path, mashing spiders underfoot in increasing numbers as she fled. How could the spiders possibly coordinate their movements? She had the hallucination of accepting a scholarly award for proving arachnid cooperation in the hunt for living food, but her heart was now pounding so hard that she wondered whether she might have a heart attack. Then Sharon realized that she was now following the same pattern as the professor probably had done the night he had disappeared. She had to vary the pattern, or she would not survive.

It was as if she was moving in slow motion through a rising tide of spiders that rose first to her ankles and then to her calves. The jungle came alive with only spiders that covered the ground and every part of the foliage. They fell around her like dark rain and she whirled around and sliced at random with her knife. She was tiring and wondered whether she had been hit by the archer darts that the professor mentioned. Could she have already been poisoned? Was paralysis setting in? She found it increasingly difficult to make progress and she longed to drop down and sleep. Sharon was a survivor and a former marathon runner, so she pressed on against the impulse to relax and quit. She pictured herself wrapped in webs alongside her mentor, and she joked with herself that she would then have followed to where his quest had led. "No!" She wanted to live.

At that moment, Sharon had an insight that comes only a few times in a lifetime, and it came just in time because she thought the spiders were now waist-high and would engulf her. She cut the net bag carrying the arachnid eggs and as it hit the path, the tsunami of spiders began to subside. Heartened by her new freedom, Sharon sprinted ahead of the arachnid horde and left them. Camp was just ahead and she was almost there when on either side of the path ahead she saw in the torchlight her greatest fears. Two huge specimens of the archer arachnid blocked her path. Sharon saw no way to go to the left or right around them because the jungle was too thick to penetrate. She slowed and stopped in front of the enormous spiders, which stood on tiptoe to observe her standing there, knife

outstretched to defend herself. Sharon summoned every scrap of knowledge that she had about spiders and did the only thing she could think of. She stuck the knife in her belt, turned off her torch and backed as far as she could into the foliage alongside the path.

As she waited, the spiders walked past her position, each brushing her clothing as they passed. She waited, hyperventilating and then switched on her torch and swept the path, which was now empty. At the door of the camp lay a softball-sized object wound around with webs. She immediately knew it was an egg sac of the archer arachnid spiders. She wondered whether it had been deposited there independently of her journey or it was a reward for the return of the other egg sacks. Thinking like an arachnid, Sharon Sanderson concluded that the archer arachnids had somehow divined that their species' survival depended on safeguarding their future generations by placing them where the best prospect of prey resided. She now had the key to writing a successful dissertation.

The only question remaining in her mind was whether Andrew would be willing to help her care for her new brood. Of course, if he was not willing, she might let the arachnids decide what to do with him. She laughed until she cried and realized that she missed the physicist dweeb and her wayward professor also. Then she gently raised the egg sac and placed it in the largest of the professor's terrariums. She decided that she wouldn't stay in Guyana long because she had done what she came to do. It was odd, but she thought the spiders had also accomplished their mission. Only time would tell and by late August, Sharon reckoned, the eggs would have begun to hatch in New Haven.

YOUR LUSTROUS WEB

Dona Fox

JUDY

"Judy, you listen to me, you're coming with us! You can't stay in this old house all the time."

"That's right, Judy. You're either at work or here at home baking. Don't get me wrong, we all love your baking, but you've got to get out!" Barbie insisted.

"Come on, it's masquerade night at the Rage! I got you this cool spider mask–this little black top will show off all your cobweb tattoos and …" Melody trailed off.

"Your cob-webby lacy skirt…" Barbie clapped her hands.

"…that I love, but you should wear it." Melody said.

"And those boots, oh my god, those boots!"

"Yes, yes, yes!"

"Come with us. Please. Please. Please."

"Alright. Alright," Judy smiled.

The three girls sat at a table covered with drinks. Melody and Barbie were the hottest girls in the Rage that night, probably ever. All the drinks had been sent over for them but they had been busy dancing so Judy had been busy drinking.

Judy wasn't used to drinking and the effect of the alcohol was multiplied as she sipped it through the tiny straw she had to use to get it through the little hole in her mask. Not to mention, Judy weighed less than one hundred pounds. Straight as a stick, to boot.

First Melody, then Barbie, came to Judy with their apologies – "Sorry Jude... Sorry Judy… there's this guy… Ah, I've got to leave you… sorry." And Judy was left alone. Drunk on her ass. A spider mask, cobweb ink, a cobwebby skirt and her wonderful black boots.

That's when Alan saw her.

Alan had long dreamed of finding a partner. A female to match himself.

Things had gone very wrong back in his family tree. Alan's grandfather was a huge, dark and glossy spider. He lived in Paris, a city of dangerous intrigue, in a loft above a chemist's shop. He fell in love with the chemist's daughter and she fell in love with his dark charms. She helped him develop concoctions that altered his DNA—that made him almost human. The traits were passed down to their children.

Alan was mostly spider, yet had the brain and the heart of a man. His pulpy torso and most of his legs was spider. His face was mostly man, but flat. He could love a woman, he could make love to a woman but in the light of day they found him hideous and he swore he would not be hurt again.

Now, this woman, she appeared to have a face like his and a body that he could love.

He swooped in.

Judy was too drunk to resist.

They ended up at her place. The family home she had inherited. An old white three story house. He took her down to the basement—to a dry, dark corner.

He came closer and closer to her face. A whisker away from her neck. In the dark her mask fell off, lips a-tingle, about to touch, tiny hairs grazed her upper lip, another's damp breath brushing into her mouth, about to clamp its mouth on hers and suck her breath away for the first time.

He entangled her in his web. A dozen rubbery arms slid around her, encircled her and squeezed the air from her lungs in one sudden clench. His fuzzy teeth raked her neck. His dripping tongues probed into the soft shells of her ears. His hot fingernails sliced her orbs and defined her eye sockets – razor spoons loosening the bounty from an egg cup. She screamed in delight. He was pleased.

She pulled away and ran up the three flights to her little sitting room and slammed the door. He scratched at the door. Her heart clenched as if those arms were wrapped around her chest again.

She opened the door. When he threw a web, she walked into it willingly.

"I'm so hungry for you, Judy."

"And I for you," she whispered. "…your lustrous web."

Dawn came and he stirred. He rubbed his flat face, stretched his hairy limbs and turned to look at the woman he had fallen in love with.

“You tricked me! You’re hideous! You were wearing a mask!” he screamed as he pushed her from him.

“Weren’t you? Weren’t you wearing a costume?” Judy’s head was pounding, her stomach was ready to relieve itself of the alcohol from the night before; she couldn’t believe the nightmare tangled between her sheets. “Is this what you really are?”

They backed away from each other.

“Oh my god,” they said in unison.

“Get out of here!” Judy flung open the door of her sitting room. “Go, just go!” She ran into her bathroom and began to vomit. “Oh my god. Oh my god. What have I done? What was he? Oh god.”

When she was through vomiting, she took more than a few, more than the prescribed number, of Vicodin, and went to bed expecting to die.

Amazingly, she woke up the next morning, not feeling half bad.

Oh, well. I’ll pretend it didn’t happen.

She went to the kitchen, made tea and went to work.

Two weeks later he was on the sidewalk outside her house. He was there every night. Pacing. A dark shadow. What did he want?

Four weeks later, her stomach was swelling.

He insinuated himself into the house.

“You can’t go to the hospital. You don’t know what you might be carrying in your womb. They may try to kill it.”

Judy put her hand to her swollen stomach.

“Oh my god. What have you done to me? Oh my god.” Then her stomach started to ripple.

“Let me help you.” He guided her up to her bed.

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DEIDRE

The house was empty. All their furniture was gone.

I drifted from room to room. All I found was cobwebs. Not even a curtain on the windows. Just cobwebs and a lot of dust.

I climbed the stairs. I was afraid, but this was important. Where did they go so quickly?
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I touched an intricate web with my fingertip. A spider ran out. It shot down on a string. I jumped back. Too late. It landed on my foot and scurried up my calf.

I felt it bite me on the thigh.

Angry now, I brushed the spider off my leg and smashed its plump body beneath my shoe. I slid my foot across the floor to ensure that nothing but a smear remained. I left the house and walked home.

The bite on my leg quickly became a fiery lump. It itched like crazy. I peered down the stairs to see what Mom and Ray were doing. They were just sitting on the couch talking. I wouldn't be in too bad trouble if I went down.

"He always leaves one alive." Ray shook his head. "Sick son of a bitch."

"Usually a kid," Mom said, then she saw me. "Deidre, what are you doing out of bed?"

I came down the rest of the stairs, went to her and pulled up my nightie just enough to reveal the bite. "I can't sleep; this itches real bad."

Ray leaned across Mom. "Just a little spider bite. Don't scratch it. It'll spread the poison all through your body. Leave it alone; it'll go away." He grabbed my ankle. "On second thought, lemme see. If there's pus in it, I can cut it open, squeeze it out." He drew out the words as he reached into his pocket.

Mom and I both looked at him. I don't know what Mom was thinking, but I was sorry I'd come down those stairs.

"Yeah, thanks, Ray, maybe tomorrow." I scooted up the steps before he could pull out his knife.

I went into the bathroom and tried putting warm washcloths on it then I tried cold. Neither seemed to help much. Maybe the cold helped a little more than the warm. I sat on the toilet and held a cold washcloth on it.

I wished Ray would go to his own house tonight. If he went home where he belonged then Mom would come up and see how I'm doing. I know she could make the bite stop itching.

"Turn that light out up there and go to sleep, kiddo!" Ray hollered.

I crawled under the covers, but I left the spider bite uncovered. It wouldn't itch as much. I stared into the darkness.

The media was calling the serial killer the Peppermint Stick Man. He killed families, leaving one alive. Usually the youngest, but not always. The psychologists on the talk shows said it wasn't about the ones he killed. They said he fed off the fear of the one he left alive. The children at school whispered that he ate that fear and grew bigger, stronger, meaner.

The hysterical child he left behind always described him as a cross between a man and a spider, for he talked out of a man's face, but carried his giant puffy spider body on legs like peppermint sticks. Peppermint sticks with bright red swirls.

As I lay there staring into the dark, I thought about my best friend, Jenny. If the spider man with the peppermint stick legs had her, it was my fault and I would never forgive myself. I hadn't seen Jenny, or her family, for two weeks.

The last time had seen her was when I left her at Granny Hamblin's on Tuesday. I felt guilty leaving her, but we were already late getting home and it was starting to rain—I had to go.

The old Hamblin house had fascinated us for as long as I could remember. It was a white three-story house hidden by trees and covered with vines. Some of the vines had deep purple flowers with white stripes through them, just like the spider man's swirled peppermint stick legs.

The rest of the vines were impudent blackberry vines that grew up into the trees only to arc down and race across the grass. They stuck their tendrils out through the fence and grabbed us as we walked by on the sidewalk. Pesky, that's what Granny Hamblin called them.

Every time we walked by, Granny Hamblin appeared at her fence with oatmeal cookies for our lunch or a jar of blackberry preserves for us to take home to our moms. Mom always made me throw the jam away; she said it was too sweet for us—way too much sugar. She said one teaspoon of that jam and all our teeth would fall out.

Granny always remembered our names, where we lived and everything we told her—just like a real grandma. Lately though, there was something wrong with her, something a bit off in her twinkling eyes. A little tightness in her lingering grasp. The corners of her smile were too eager.

"Is that a doll?" Jenny had pointed to a window on the third floor. "It looks so real."

“Yes. Yes. That’s my little sitting room. I have my very special things in there. Would you like to come up the stairs and see? Maybe there’s something there for you.” She cocked her birdlike head and flashed her brittle smile.

“No. No.” I grabbed Jenny’s hand and pulled, but she slipped from my grasp.

“Yes, Granny,” Jenny nodded earnestly. She seemed way too serious for someone agreeing to go see a doll.

I turned once and watched as she followed Granny Hamblin up the steps, and I turned once more before I went around my corner. That’s when I saw the light come on in the third-floor window and the tasseled blind come down. I hadn’t seen Jenny since that day. I’d gone to her house and knocked on the door, but there had been no answer.

Today I stood in front of the old white house thinking maybe I should sneak in and look for her. The house looked dark and deserted except now there were two dolls in the window. I squinted at the second doll. Of course, it didn’t look anything like Jenny. I half-smiled to think I could be so silly.

“Deidre. You look so pretty when you smile.” Granny Hamblin popped up from behind the hedge with a bowl of fresh-picked blackberries in her hand. “Are you waiting to come in?”

“No. I won’t come in.”

“Why not, dear?” Granny laid one hand across her chest, on her heart. Her fingertips were stained purple from the blackberry juice. Her hand was bruised and bleeding from the thorns.

“Jenny went in and I haven’t seen her again.”

“Deidre, don’t be so clever. Don’t you think if Jenny hadn’t gone home the police would be everywhere looking for her? Have you seen any police?” She scanned the street with eager eyes.

That was true. No one had said a word, in the neighborhood or at school. I was the only one who seemed to think she was missing.

“You’ve got yourself so worked up with your flights of imagination. Come, rest on my porch. I’ve a lovely porch swing with nice plump pillows. You can calm down. Rest awhile.” Granny nodded her head and smiled.

“Oh, no, no, I can’t come onto your porch. No.”

“Well, here’s a little bench, right inside the gate, we can sit here together. Everyone walks by right here. I’ll go get a slice of sweet bread. Would you like that? Or maybe come in and choose something for yourself.

I have banana bread, pumpkin bread…" I stared at her knobby fingers, again noticing the bruises and the blood as she struggled to unlock the gate.

"No, I won't come in."

"Alright, dear. You must be on your way somewhere special. Your dress is so pretty. And your hair is so shiny. But wait, it needs a little brushing in the back, would you like to come in and use my mirror? Do you have a full-length mirror at home?" I needed no mirror; the distress on her face reflected the full horror that was obviously to be found on the back of my head.

"No, I don't have a full-length mirror."

"Well, pop in for a moment and use mine." Her bruised, contorted fingers succeeded—the gate swung open.

"No, no, no. I'm sorry, Granny, but I must go. I'll see you tomorrow."

Shrugging and biting her lower lip, Granny went back into her house. And I went home—to check my hair.

~~~

I dreamt that she filled her tub with noxious fluids and rolled the full-length mirror in front of the bathroom door. She put a small vial in her left pocket and a lacelike handkerchief in the right, then she came down to the garden again where I was waiting. I was very anxious. My hair was a mess. Strands floated in the air behind me.

"Oh, Deidre, back so soon?" She grabbed my hands and I floated over the fence.

"Is my hair really in need of brushing?" Tears flowed from my eyes.

"Yes, dear, just a bit, in the very back and you should see how lovely you look in the full-length mirror!" She snaked her arm around my waist several times and once I was secured, we drifted up her winding stairs.

She flung me into a giant cobweb in the corner of her dark parlor. The husk of Jenny was already hanging on the other side. The more I fought, the more entangled I became. Granny's tongue struck—thin and sharp—and stung me on the leg.

I dreamt that I woke up shivering, sweating. The bite on my leg was a hot lump that itched like a pile of red ants crawling under my skin. My pillow was soaked with perspiration; I turned it over. I threw the damp washcloth on the floor.
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Something stirred in the corner of the room.

I sat up and pushed my back against the headboard. I stayed perfectly still, trying to outlast it, waiting for it to move again. My eyes strained against the darkness, scanning for a shade of difference, even the perception of movement.

Was that a breath? Did I hear a step?

Now I felt that it had come closer. Loomed larger.

It filled more of the air between me and the corner of my room, which could only mean it was closer to my bed. Closer to my face. A whisker away from my skin.

Lips a tingle, about to touch. Tiny hairs grazed my upper lip. Another's damp breath hushing into my mouth, about to clamp its mouth on mine and suck my breath away.

A dozen rubbery arms slid around me, encircled me, and squeezed the air from my lungs in one sudden clench. Fuzzy teeth raked my neck. Dripping tongues probed into the soft shells of my ears. Hot fingernails sliced my orbs and defined my eye sockets—razor spoons loosening the bounty from an egg cup.

But I was still asleep for I struggled yet could not rise, could not loosen the grip of those spidery arms and sudden legs.

Then there were screams, not my own, which, in my dream, empowered me to rise.

In that same dream, I woke sitting up, shivering cold in a warm, wet bed.

I jumped out of my sodden bed, tore off the sheets and my nightgown. As I stood there with my urine stained clothes in my arms, I heard Ray cry out in agony. Once, twice, three times.

A coward, I slid to the floor.

I was sure the spider man was in our house.

For dream hours it was as if the spider man was playing a song, one musician with three instruments. Ray, Mom and my sister, Sandra. I was frozen to the door, still clutching my pee stained sheets and nightie—shivering, naked, afraid and ashamed of my cowardice. The notes got fainter and weaker. Until the song faded away altogether.

Then I heard scratching at my door. My heart clenched as if those arms were wrapped around my chest again.

And then I heard a voice speaking to me, so low, so quiet, I'm still not sure there were words at all. Perhaps it was simply the blood pounding in my ears.

"Come down here, way down low. Lay your ear near the bottom of the door. Down here, way down low. Near the bottom of the door. Come. Come down. Bring your ear to the floor."

Sobbing, biting the sheets to stay quiet, I slid down until my ear was on the floor.

I could feel warm breath and hear the catch in the spider man's throat as he whispered, oh so very quietly, "I'm still hungry, Deidre."

It was dark, so I couldn't be sure—but did I see the edge of a hairy, spidery foot, or was that an old woman's crooked finger that slid under the door and tried to touch me? I'm sure I heard nails scratch on the floor as it struggled to rise then I heard careful footsteps plodding down the stairs and out the front door.

The house seemed empty. Most of the furniture gone.

I went from room to room. Empty cobwebs. No flies. Where are the flies?

I was afraid, but this was important. I ran up and down the stairs. Not a curtain on the windows. Just cobwebs. And dust. Where did the flies go so quickly?

Ah, there they were, in the pantry, all over the jam, all over the sweet bread. The flies.

Then the smell overcame me. I covered my nose and mouth. My stomach convulsed. I waited until I was strong. Strong enough to go into the dining room.

Jenny's father sat at the dining table. His face was in his soup bowl. He was covered with cobwebs. Wrapped in cobwebs, a cocoon of cobwebs. I stood and stared as if it were not real. As if he were a wax figure laid out for my benefit—or a clue. Like the flies in the pantry with the jam and the sweetbread.

I thought I heard a soft moan. I went into the next room. Jenny's mother stood in the kitchen. Rather, she was lashed to the refrigerator by round after round of thick cobwebs that held her upright. Her open eyes followed my movements as I entered the room.

Her mouth may have once been open in a scream; her lips were still stretched taut, but her scream was now stuffed with a tight white ball. I touched the ball with my finger; hundreds of tiny spiders ran down her chin and across her body—up her nose and into her open eyes.

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I jumped back and hit my head on the wall behind my bed—this time I had no doubt I had awakened from all of the fevered dreams brought on by the spider bite.

The light coming in my window was grey and temporary, briefly granted by the falling moon. I could see there was no one in my bedroom but me.

At the Hamblin house, there was a light on in the kitchen. I went through the back yard and tip-toed across the porch. Granny saw me coming and motioned me to the door.

"Where is he?" I whispered.

She wasn't surprised at my question. "He sleeps in the cellar during the day. But he's got Jenny down there so I can't do anything."

"Her parents?"

"He said he killed them." Granny's lips trembled.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't understand what you were trying to tell me." I took her bruised hand gently. "We're going to call the police, then we're going to turn out all your lights. Where's the circuit breaker?"

"It's outside, by the path."

"Good. Take my phone." I pressed it gently into her tender hands. "Flip the circuit breaker then go out front and call 911, tell them to hurry. Okay?"

"Okay. But, tell me, why did you come back?"

"I had a feeling."

Granny nodded and squeezed my hand.

After she had gone out the door, I whispered to myself. "I'm sorry I thought you were a spider, too."

~~~

Down in the cellar the spider man stirred. He rubbed his flat face, stretched hairy limbs and, simply out of habit, flared his nostrils. But wait. He flared his nostrils again. Then twice more, quickly. He drew a hairy limb gently through the air and back. Then once again. Yes. He felt a new presence. His heart beat faster.

He was tiring of this captive; this Jenny, he had grown weary of her—her fear was stale. She had become numb to fright.

There were so many people in this town, but they all felt nothing. They had no passion.

The spider man had no one. No one loved him. No one could ever love him. He was hideous. He knew that. He could only inspire fear, or hate. Hate was ugly.

His mother had hated his father for tricking her; thus, his mother hated him. She threw him aside as soon as he was born. She had hoped he would be human. But mostly he was his father.

His spider father did what he had to; he kept him alive, but he could not love him—for he had a human face. The woman hadn't had a human face the night he'd taken her. He hated her for tricking him. He cast his half human child out as soon as it could survive on its own.

So the spider man was without love, without connections. And, even though he was, like his father, able to take a human woman, he would not do that. He would not risk the possibility of creating another monster like himself.

But fear, fear was sharp and exciting. Without fear, he had only his dark corners. Without fear, he hid in the dark with his depression.

This new one. She was exciting. She thought she wanted to do battle. But she hadn't seen him yet. He would see her fear. He would make her tremble—a leaf still clinging to a winter tree. Then he would slowly, oh so slowly, take her life.

Deep within the spider man's bowels his evil passions surged to create two solutions that raced to one special place where they combined to form a poison that only got more deadly as it raced through the veins that encircled his legs—the spider man's swirled peppermint stick legs. The spider man was ready.

He didn't care if it was dark. He didn't need eyes to see. He could visualize everything for miles based on tiny ripples of air that splashed against the feathery hairs on his giant granddaddy legs.

Besides, as much as she hated him, Mother wasn't calling the police —she was locking the back door.

He shot out of his dark corner and scurried up the stairs.

Tears ran down the lines etched in her face and dripped from her chin as Granny covered her mouth with trembling fingers and mumbled, "Your food's waiting, Son."

The spider man smiled; he was having Deidre for dinner tonight.

MEET THE AUTHORS

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Gary Budgen grew up and still lives in London, UK. He has had fiction published in various places including anthologies such as Where are We Going?; The Urban Green Man anthology; After the End; Suffer Eternal 2; and After the Fall. He has also been published in magazines like Interzone, Dark Horizons, Ethereal Tales, Morpheus Tales, M-Brane SF, and Theaker's Quarterly. He has an MA in Creative Writing from Middlesex University and is a member of London Clockhouse Writers. He can be found at: http://garybudgen.wordpress.com/

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Dr. Wilson F. Engel, III, writing under his own name and the pseudonym E. W. Farnsworth, is widely published on line and in print. He is the winner of four first-place prizes in open, international competitions for his short stories in 2014 and one so far in 2015, Dr. Engel's collected westerns, collected spy stories and collected romance/thriller stories will be separately published in 2015. He has had ten stories contracted for publication in Horrified Press anthologies, including 'The Cold Ghost Tentacles,' in Loch Shock, December, 2014. Some of E. W. Farnsworth's sci fi stories are available from Ether Books in the UK, and two of his John Fulghum mysteries are available from IndelibleCHAOS in IN. Dr Engel is a Distinguished Member of the International Society of Poets in the UK, He will be featured in Who's Who in American Poetry, 2015. He was born in California but now lives and writes in Arizona, USA. He was honored to be Leverhulme Professor of Literature at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

Michael B Fletcher is a writer of adventure, science fiction and fantasy. He has been published in a number of magazines and anthologies, most recently in Pill Hill's 'Conquest through Determination' anthology. He is currently working on the second book in a fantasy trilogy for adults. The first book, 'Masters of Scent' was long-listed for the Australian 2010 Olvar Wood awards. He lives in Tasmania, Australia. His YA anthology 'Kings of Under-Castle was published by IFWG Australia in 2013.

Dona Fox has published stories and poems in Eldritch Tales, Haunts, Thin Ice, Cemetery Dance (Issue #1), Beyond, and New Blood magazines, and numerous James Ward Kirk and J Ellington Ashton Press publications. An odd childhood and a misspent youth left her fairly well-read and marginally able to shoot pool. Now she is a horror, sci-fi and bent fantasy author looking for quiet corners where she can write.

Ken Goldman, former English and Film Studies teacher and affiliate member of the Horror Writers Association, lives on the Main Line in Pennsylvania and at the Jersey shore. His stories received seven honorable mentions in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror and appear in over 600 publications in the U.S., Canada, the UK, and Australia. His book of short stories, "You Had Me At ARRGH!!" (Sam's Dot Publishers) remained an all-time top ten best seller at the former Genre Mall from October 2007 until its closing in March 2011. Damnation Books published his novella "Desiree"

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Ash Hartwell lives in the English countryside and has had short stories published by Static Movement, Wicked East, Undead Press and Thirteen. He is currently working on both an anthology of his own stories and his first novel. Both should be available through JEA. Ash can often be found lurking around Facebook.

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Shannon Hollinger has degrees in Crime Scene Technology and Physical Anthropology, which means she hasn't just seen the dark side of humanity - she's been elbow deep inside it. She lives in Massachusetts where she is owned by two Terrier Terrorists and spends her free time writing and climbing mountains. To discover more of her work, check out www.shannonhollinger.com.

Kevin Holton is a New Jersey-based writer of prose and poetry, having had seventeen short stories, several poems and a book review accepted since he first began seeking publication two years ago. His work has appeared in journals such as *Pleiades* and *TAB: A Journal of Poetry & Poetics* as well as popular anthologies in genres ranging from paranormal and romance to thriller and psychological horror. He is a member of Sigma Tau Delta and Mensa, and is currently working on his second novel.

Mathias Jansson is a Swedish art critic and horror poet. He has been published in magazines as The Horror Zine Magazine, Dark Eclipse, Schlock, The Sirens Call, Apehlion and Trembles Horror Magazine. He has also contributed to several anthologies from Horrified Press, James Ward Kirk Fiction, Source Point Press and other publishers.

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Thomas M. Malafarina (www.ThomasMMalafarina.com) is an author of horror fiction from Berks County, Pennsylvania. To date he has published four horror novels “Ninety-Nine Souls”, "Burn Phone", “Eye Contact” and “Fallen Stones” as well as four collections of horror short stories; “Thirteen Nasty Endings”, "Gallery Of Horror",

“Malafarina Maleficarum Vol. 1”, Malafarina Maleficarum Vol. 2” and most recently “Ghost Shadows”. He has also published a book of often strange single panel cartoons called "Yes I Smelled It Too; Cartoons For The Slightly Off Center". All of his books have been published through Sunbury Press (www.Sunburypress.com).

Bruce Markuson is married with two children. He lives in Milwaukee WI and has a number of short stories published. Bruce is also working on a series. He enjoys writing and often finds himself with writer’s obsession. He says the best way to write is to have an ending then write to that ending. Check out his website at brucemarkuson@blogspot.com.

M. J. McClymont is a writer of horror, sci-fi and fantasy fiction. He has written numerous short stories which have appeared in various print and electronic publications under his own name and the pseudonym, Zach Black. Martin lives with his wife, Kim in the seaside town of Ardrossan on the west coast of Scotland, a land steeped in history, myth and legend by which he is constantly inspired.

Rick McQuiston: I'm a forty-six year old father of two who loves anything horror-related. To date, I've had well over 300 publications in many different countries. My work has appeared in numerous e-zines, print publications, and anthologies. I've written three novels, eight anthology books, and one book of novellas. I've also edited an anthology of Michigan authors. I'm a guest author each year at

Memphis Junior High School, and am currently working on my fifth novel and a Cthulhu-themed anthology.

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Evan Purcell is an American living and working in rural China, a land of ancient traditions, friendly people and absolutely no cheese in a hundred-mile radius. Except for that last part, he really enjoys his life abroad. He also writes a lot of horror and sci-fi short stories, as well as the occasional romance novel. You can read about his travels and his weirdly eclectic writing at EvanPurcell.Blogspot.com. And if you see him walking down the street, please offer him some American cheese. He misses it so much.

Gene Stewart is a writer and artist. He currently lives in the Midwest American Wilderness where he is researching tales of mystical realism, writing ficta mystica, and exploring the dark by casting a little light into the shadows. His website is genestewart.com/wordpress where there are many samples of his work and much else; come explore.

DJ Tyrer is the person behind *Atlantean Publishing* and has been widely published in anthologies and magazines in the UK, USA and elsewhere, most recently in *Steampunk Cthulhu* (Chaosium), *Tales of the Dark Arts* (Hazardous Press), *Cosmic Horror* (Dark Hall Press) and *Serial Killers Quattuor* (JWK Fiction), as well as in *Sorcery & Sanctity: A Homage to Arthur Machen* (Hieroglyphics

Press), *All Hallow's Evil* and *Undead of Winter* (both Mystery & Horror LLC) and *Fossil Lake* (Daverana Enterprises/Sabledrake Enterprises), and in addition, has two novellas available on the Kindle, *The Yellow House* (Dynatox Ministries) and *Acting Strangely* (Jazzclaw Publishing). DJ Tyrer's website is at http://djtyrer.blogspot.co.uk/

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Matthew Wilson is a UK resident who has been writing since an early age and lately the terror tales have escaped to various ezines and magazines. He is currently sharing his time between two jobs and one novel.

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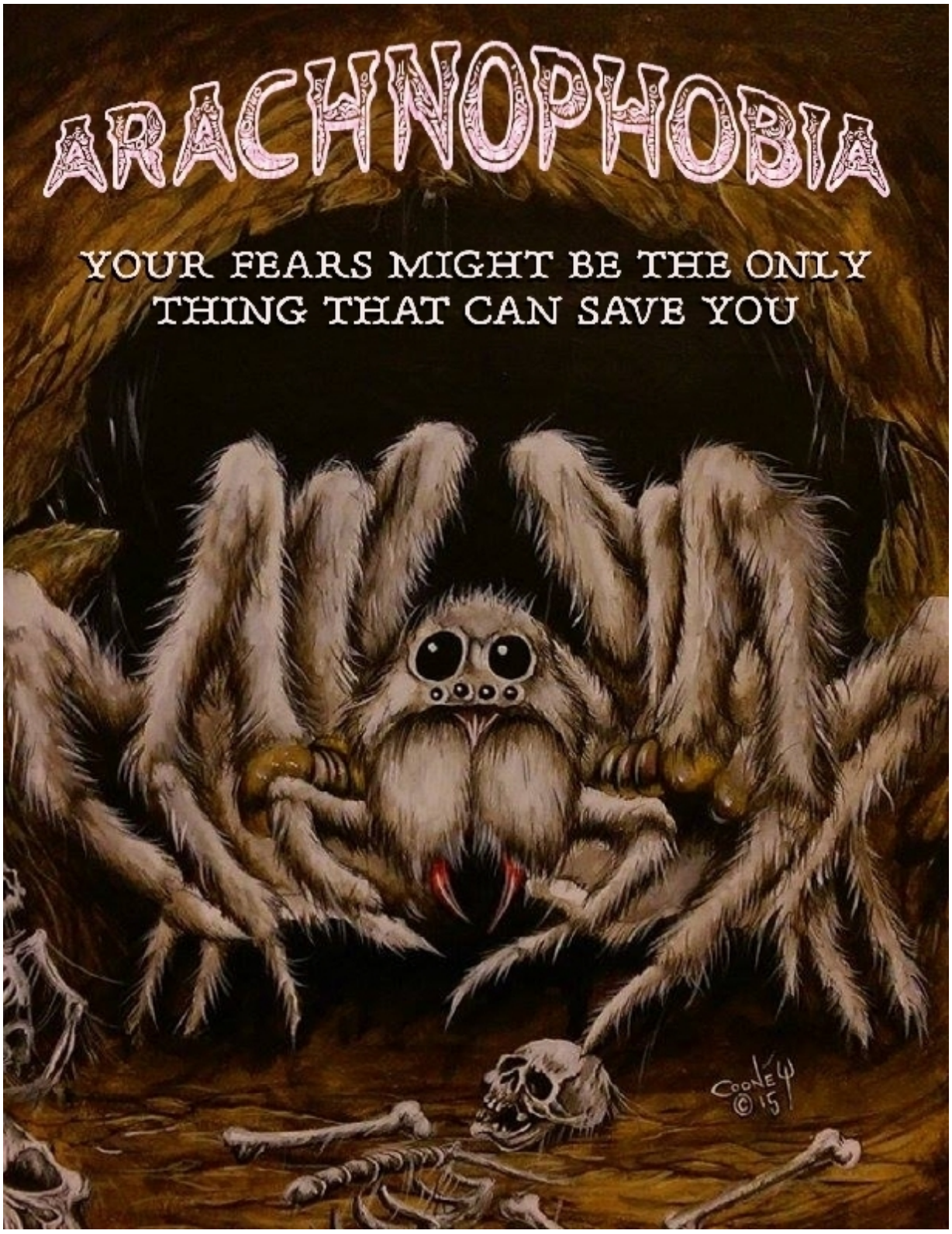
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